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The Textual Ecology of Christine Montalbetti's *Journée américaine*

Anne McConnell

English Department, West Virginia State University, Institute, WV 25837, USA; amcconnell@wvstateu.edu

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Abstract: Christine Montalbetti's 2009 novel, *Journée américaine*, depicts a road trip, as Donovan travels from Oklahoma to visit his college friend, Tom Lee, who lives on a ranch in Colorado. While the road trip provides a basic structure for the narrative, as the text unfolds, we realize that Montalbetti's narrator prefers to meander, rather than taking us in a linear manner towards a final destination. The narrator dives into memories, digressions, philosophical reflections, and backstories of seemingly peripheral characters in order to flesh out a complex narrative mesh. Timothy Morton's notion of "the ecological thought" provides a compelling lens through which we can read Montalbetti's novel, encouraging us to consider the ecological implications of a text that might not at first strike us as having anything to do with ecology. *Journée américaine* pushes against the outer edge of the text, spilling over into the world and also demonstrating the ways that the environment participates in the text. Montalbetti's attention to objects, nonhuman animals, and landscapes further emphasizes how narrative does not necessarily require a human subject at the center. In the end, the narrative mesh of *Journée américaine* demonstrates a sprawling, complex network of relations that unfolds outward and defies boundaries.

Keywords: French literature; contemporary literature; ecocriticism; contemporary fiction

In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton writes, "Ecocriticism has overlooked the way in which all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its *form*. Ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art, isn't just about something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth). Ecological art *is* something, or maybe it *does* something" (Morton 2010b, p. 11). Morton's claim pushes us to broaden the practice of ecocriticism beyond texts that seem explicitly to invite that sort of reading.[1] After all, if we refrain from relying on conventional binaries that delineate culture and nature, humans and their environment, instead seeing the interplay of human and non-human components of ecosystems, how can we sustain a type of ecocriticism that neglects the ecological questions that permeate a variety of spaces, behaviors, and ways of thinking?[2] Beyond questions of subject matter,

[1] Stephanie Posthumus, in her study of ecological thought and literature in France, explains that the trajectory of ecocriticism is different in some ways from what we see in North America. Influential figures in contemporary French ecological thinking, Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, often challenge foundational assumptions of mainstream environmentalism. Posthumus writes, "Latour remains highly critical to the ways in which Green parties reduce ecological issues to problems related to nature and environment" (Posthumus 2017, p. 13). While Morton certainly engages with Anglophone literary and critical traditions, his notion of ecological thought resonates with the work of thinkers like Latour because he wants to complicate what he sees as reductive notions of nature and to open ecocriticism and ecological thinking beyond a limited set of environmental issues. In addition, Latour's concept of collectives, as I discuss later in the paper, relates to Morton's emphasis on "the mesh" and networks of human and nonhuman agencies.

[2] A number of contemporary thinkers have challenged the conventional binary of nature and culture, including Morton, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway. Throughout *Ecology without Nature,* Morton writes about the importance of exposing and rejecting mythic thinking about the natural world. Such myths, he contends, downplay or dismiss the entanglement of human societies and cultural practices with the natural world. Latour suggests the term "natures–cultures" to describe collectives of

Morton invites us to consider the ecological-ness of art and writing—the ways in which the practice of art and writing demonstrates, performs, enacts the ecological. Morton asks us to "think big," since we're dealing with "a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge" (p. 8). That kind of thinking provokes reflection on systems and relationships, though not seeing any system as total, closed, or static. Morton argues, "Thinking the ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open—open forever, without the possibility of closing again" (p. 8). In the spirit of that radical openness, ecocriticism addresses the ways humans affect and change the ecosystems we inhabit, and the ways they affect and change us. With those ideas in mind, we can begin to see why an ecocritical lens might provide for a compelling reading of many texts that might not at first strike us as expressly ecological.

Christine Montalbetti's *Journée américaine* relates a road trip from Oklahoma to Colorado over the course of one day.[3] Donovan embarks on this trip to reunite with his college friend, Tom Lee, who has lived alone on a ranch ever since a bad breakup with a woman named Linda. While the road novel in some ways lends itself to a linear structure, very little about Montalbetti's book feels linear, or a matter of getting from point A to point B. Instead, the novel follows numerous paths in various directions, committing itself to the backstories of seemingly minor characters—human and nonhuman—and thinking about the ways we shape, and are shaped by, the spaces and objects we engage with. In interviews, Montalbetti notes her influences, including writers like Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Jean Echenoz, and Tanguy Viel, and she also remarks on the importance of cinema in her novels, some of which rely upon the imagery of landscapes depicted in classic westerns (Motte 2009, pp. 479, 481). Much of the criticism on Montalbetti's work insightfully explores the metafictional implications of her writing, addressing the ways that her novels interact with her work as a literary critic.

Warren Motte comments that Montalbetti's novels "put on stage a wide variety of characters, situations, and events, yet each book testifies in similar ways to a profound reflection on narrative art, and each pays close attention to the *critical* dimension of contemporary writing" (Motte 2011, p. 1). Montalbetti's novels clearly communicate with the work of contemporary French writers, like Echenoz and Toussaint, who see fiction as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of literature, combining narrative practices with a simultaneous reflection on those practices.[4] That kind of critical reflection, though not usually viewed in ecocritical terms, can provide a link to Morton's notion of the ecological thought because it pushes us to consider the inner workings of writing and how those workings, in some ways, can be understood as ecological. From that point of view, my reading of *Journée américaine* will engage in ecological thinking, specifically as a means of: developing an understanding of the novel's digressive narrative style as ecological; discussing the radical de-centering of narrative perspective as a challenge to anthropocentric or subject-centered storytelling; considering the significance of objects, nonhuman animals, and settings in our experience of and artistic engagement with the world; and thinking about the construction of landscapes through art, writing, and human ways of seeing.

One of the most striking features of Montalbetti's novels is the tendency of the narrative to meander, launching here and there into a backstory or digression that might not feel like it has bearing on the central story or characters. Indeed, much of that meandering serves to challenge the notion

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humans and nonhumans, emphasizing the relations between social and natural processes and actors, demonstrating their inextricability (Latour 1993, p. 104–6). Haraway uses the term "natureculture" in *When Species Meet* to discuss the ways companion species "become with" one another, challenging the notion of a human subject separate from the natural world (p. 16).

[3] I have chosen to refer to the text by the original French title, *Journée américaine*, though I will be citing Jane Kuntz's translation, *American Journal*.

[4] Montalbetti has written over ten novels in the last two decades, including *Western* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005), *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* (Paris: P.O.L., 2014), and *L'Évaporation de l'oncle* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001). She also has a background in literary criticism and has published in that field. Jean Echenoz has written a number of novels that trace the lives of both historical and fictional artist figures, like *Ravel* (Paris: Minuit, 2006) and *Au piano* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), providing a reflection on the artistic process. Jean-Philippe Toussaint often engages with the question of how the solitary act of writing engages with the busyness of the world and the barrage of virtual images we encounter on a daily basis (see La télévision, Paris: Minuit, 1997; and La salle de bain, Paris: Minuit, 1985).

of centrality, pointing instead to a network of stories, each one loaded with the possibility of further branching. In *Journée américaine*, the narrator describes the townsfolk taking turns telling stories related to Tom Lee and Linda Burn: "the characters of this little saga compose something like a deck of cards for the boys at the bar [. . .], who shuffle and draw at random, coming up with this or that protagonist" (Montalbetti 2009b, p. 134). The image of the deck of cards makes us aware of the substitutability and arbitrariness of the protagonist, in the sense that any story we may read or hear could unfold in a variety of directions, following any number of characters or stories. Montalbetti's novels often allow for the shuffling of the deck, not respecting conventional storytelling constraints that demand the storyteller stay focused. Motte and Philippe Brand understand the author's dilatory style in terms of Ross Chambers' concept of "loiterature," a style of writing that tends to meander, performing a lack of concern over the pressure to arrive, in a reasonable amount of time, at a specific destination (Motte 2017, p. 66; Brand 2019, p. 233; Chambers 1999).[5] Though, as Chambers points out, the pleasurable, seemingly unconstrained movement of a loiterly narrative has serious implications: "if there's pleasure in digression, all the warnings about slippery slopes and open floodgates are nevertheless appropriate. Digression happens because it can happen, but it escalates because what can happen, once it escapes control, will go on happening" (Chambers 1999, p. 13). In other words, digression points to a radical openness; one digression can lead to another digression, or can be replaced by a different digression. Perhaps for that reason, Montalbetti contends, along with Nathalie Piégay-Gros, that digression, "is frequently considered a transgression. [. . .] Digression, on a first read, is heterogeneity, deconstruction; it undermines the principle of coherence" (Montalbetti and Piégay-Gros 2000, p. 9).[6]

Instead of linearity and coherence—a sense that everything in the text fits together with the purpose of supporting a central narrative—*Journée américaine* offers a rich mesh of stories, indulging in digression to construct a complex and interrelated narrative universe. My description here is intended to provide some initial insight into the ecological character of a text that functions by way of digression, since it develops a wide array of characters and situations in relation to one another, emphasizing the way those relationships participate in a fabric of ecological textuality. That reading perhaps suggests that ecology functions as a metaphor for textuality—and it does, but it also functions in more literal ways. I would like to explore both, and to consider the ways that the figurative and the literal might blur when we challenge the presumption of a clear boundary between text and context, between writing and world. In "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology," Morton writes, "text as ecology is a good metaphor. But thinking can go much further than this, since if the text has no thin, rigid boundary, what it includes, what it touches, must also consist of life forms, Earth itself, and so on. The difference between what counts as a mere metaphor and what counts as non-metaphorical reality collapses when thinking engages text seriously" (Morton 2010a, p. 2–3).

Morton suggests that ecological thinking reflects a way of relating to the world as much as it reflects a way of approaching a literary text. A narrative fabric of interrelated stories is not separate from broader practices of collecting and ordering relations between human and nonhuman actors in the world. I am using language here that evokes Bruno Latour's notion of the composition of collectives, or assemblages, of humans and nonhumans that make up the common world. In *Politics of Nature*, he discusses the act of composing, clarifying that a collective "refers not to an already-established unit but to a procedure for *collecting* associations of humans and nonhumans" (Latour 2004, p. 238). While Latour's discussion of the open, ongoing formation of collectives is not specific to art and literature, Stephanie Posthumus notes his choice of the word "compose": "He likes the word's multiple meanings in various areas of artistic creation and expression, science, and politics" (Posthumus 2017, p. 103). Morton's ecological thought resonates with the work of French thinkers like Latour, Félix Guattari, and Michel Serres who, like him, challenge conceptualizations of the environment that emphasize separation between

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[5] Montalbetti mentions Chambers' notion of "loiterature" in "A Walk on the Beach" (Montalbetti 2015, p. 99).
[6] Unless otherwise noted, translations of French texts into English are mine.

human societies and the natural world.[7] As Posthumus explains, "For Latour, ecology becomes a verb—*écologiser*—that stands in opposition to *moderniser* and refers to the political and epistemological project of accounting for non-humans as actors in social networks" (p. 15). From that perspective, the notion of an ecological text—one that defies rigid boundaries, emphasizes the open, unfolding process of composition, and collects relations and associations—is not limited to a "text proper," but, rather, reflects the work of assembling in literary texts and in the world.

In an essay on her own work, Montalbetti discusses the dilatory style of her writing, emphasizing the way that the continual shifts in focus and attention, from one character, object, or situation to another, reflect her experience in the world.

> Everything that in my writing seems like evasion, diffidence, or discretion, or my propensity for distraction (my eye, like that of my characters, is easily snagged by some background feature, and engages my thought process, and theirs), my fondness for spinning stories out of the smallest detail (for every object in a scene contains a story that one might begin to tell), and especially my conviction that what we call digression is in fact at the very heart of our experience. (Montalbetti 2014, p. 100–1).

Montalbetti's description of her writing demonstrates the play between her own experience of the world and that of her characters. The wandering of the characters' thoughts and perceptions mirrors, and perhaps enacts, those of the writer. Take the description of Jane, whose "voice carries along in its flow, details that are now far afield from the simple events recounted in her original story, muddying the stream so badly that it's now impossible to sort it all out" (Montalbetti 2009b, p. 48). In describing Jane's approach to storytelling, the narrator seems to express her own tendencies, and provides an opportunity for the reader to reflect on her or his reading experience up to that point. Like Donovan, we might have trouble sorting it all out, filtering and organizing the contents of the stream, but, hopefully, remain open to the "transformational operation" of the experience (p. 49). We have the sense that we experience her wandering mind and her interest in the objects and stories that might, to others, seem peripheral or non-essential. Admittedly, that sense depends upon some presumptions about the relationship of the narrative voice of the text to Montalbetti herself. As we see in the passage above, Montalbetti encourages and plays with those presumptions, challenging any attempt firmly to establish, and separate out, the diegetic levels of the text. As Motte notes, Montalbetti's fiction stages "a debate that shuttles back and forth vertiginously—but fluidly—between illusion and reality" (Motte 2017, p. 123). This relates to Morton's point that the text has no rigid boundaries, and suggests the way that Montalbetti's fictions complicate and play with the distinction of text and world.

Montalbetti commits her writing to the proliferation of stories, privileging meandering over focus, and thus constructs a text that tends to unfold, rather than advancing forward. After a chapter that introduces Linda Burn and discusses her relationship with Tom Lee, the narrator begins the next chapter, "About the Linda Burn story, obviously, we could still embellish, so why not go back to her childhood while we're at it" (p. 110). Later in the chapter, the narrator muses, "Further, the circle can be enlarged to include, for instance, Linda Burn's best childhood friend [. . .]" (p. 113). As the stories ramify, we find ourselves in an increasingly complex network of characters, stories, settings, and objects—all connected to one another, even if by a seemingly flimsy thread. We end up with something that evokes what Morton calls the "mesh," or the complex, undefined, continually evolving network of interrelated things, living and non-living (Morton 2010b, p. 28). He explains, "the mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences. [. . .] And each being in the mesh interacts with others. The mesh isn't static. We can't rigidly specify anything as irrelevant. If there is no background and therefore no foreground, then where are we?" (p. 30). The most direct application of this idea to *Journée américaine* concerns the narrative mesh Montalbetti constructs—the ever-widening

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[7] See Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, Trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995; and Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

circle of stories that, in privileging seemingly secondary stories, objects, and people, undermines the very notion of primary and secondary, foreground and background.[8] As we have seen, text also spills over into context, and the ecology of the text can be understood to include author, reader, the page, the writing practice, and the setting for that practice, together with the objects, texts, flora, and fauna that make up the setting. That is not to assume a continuity from text to context, but also not a discontinuity.

For Morton, ecological art and writing, or art and writing approached from an ecological perspective, emphasize what he calls "ambience," or the environment of the work—not so much surrounding the work, but participating in it (p. 103). The notion of ambience helps us to understand the tricky movement from text to context, especially if we are considering a work that draws attention to the interaction of textual and contextual spaces. I use those terms with some hesitation, since, as Jonathan Culler writes, "context is not fundamentally different from what it contextualizes." (p. xiv). This is part of the point of what Morton calls ecological art. Art takes place in the world, and ecological art makes that taking place a part of the work. Morton writes, "The blank page, the open canvas, the gallery space, the silence (or quiet, or, more properly, noise) around and within the music displays the medium in which and through which we're reading, listening, looking, participating" (p. 103). As Morton suggests, the environment of the work, no matter how quiet or seemingly empty, participates in the work and affects our experience of the work. Montalbetti published a kind of companion text with *Journée américaine* called *En écrivant* Journée américaine, where she describes her experiences visiting the United States and how they informed the writing of the novel; details her writing environment, including objects on her writing desk, the view from her window, and her notebooks; and reflects on "the mysterious interaction of the setting with the phrases that one produces" (Montalbetti 2009a, p. 35). The text highlights the significance Montalbetti sees in the writing situation and the way it participates in the work of writing: "when we write, there are undeniably objects, or images, that stimulate us. That help us, push us, encourage us, that awaken our desire, that nourish us" (p. 10). Montalbetti reflects on how and why the words land on the page as they do—not to reinforce the idea of authorial intention or to explain how the reader should understand the text, but to provide insight into the way the work of writing takes shape in relation to the world. The text incorporates the environment, as the environment participates in the text.

Journée américaine, and other fictions by Montalbetti, often invite the reader to feel as if she or he participates in a conversation with the author herself—specifically when the narrator addresses "you," the implied reader, and also when she refers to herself as "Christine." That play with the diegetic levels of the text, again, pushes against the outer edge of the text, making space for the extra-textual within the text itself. That gesture is environmental, in Morton's understanding of that term, though not naïve. Naming the reader and naming the writer draws attention to the medium or context in which reading and writing take place. Montalbetti, in her critical work, sees the communication between writer and reader within the text as a "utopian concept" (Montalbetti 1992, p. 8). As Brand puts it, "no matter how strongly the author may wish to communicate with her reader, no matter how many times the narrator calls herself 'Christine' or tells us 'regardez-moi dans les yeux,' ['look me in the eyes'] [*Journée* 124] we cannot physically look into her eyes" (p. 235). Still, the narrator persists, reaching out towards a hypothetical reader, often in a conversational manner. One of the first clear examples in *Journée américaine* comes as the narrator reflects upon the way a relationship begins to wane between lovers and then turns to "you" with an aside: "for you've certainly had the opportunity, as I have, to observe couples dining at a hotel restaurant, sitting silently across a table " (p. 6). Motte argues that in moments such as these, Montalbetti "seeks to enlist her reader in a textual dynamic based on the principle of collaboration" (Motte 2017, p. 57). We feel invited to participate, that our thoughts

[8] In *French Fiction,* Motte notes the beginning of the story in *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007) where the narrator discusses her interest in "the little scenes in the background" (p. 55).

and observations might enrich the text, or simply add to the conversation. While neither Montalbetti nor most of her readers fails to see the problems of conflating an author with a narrator, a reader with a narratee, Motte contends, "Montalbetti deliberately casts those figures as fluid and mobile ones" (p. 54).[9] That kind of mobility—one that blurs the line of text and context, fictional and real, inside and outside—ties into Morton's notion of the ecological, since it invites the environment where reading and writing take place into the folds of the narrative.

I would now like to turn more specifically to the narrative mesh of *Journée amériane* to consider how the stories, characters, and settings demonstrate, or converse with, ecological thinking. The proliferation of stories clearly contributes to the meandering quality of the text, and emphasizes the way that a given character or story necessarily interacts with, and develops in relation to, other characters and stories. While we do spend time with Donovan and Tom Lee, we also get to know their friends, their love interests, the families of their love interests, a number of other characters also pop up as the narrator moseys along. We meet their college friend Keith, a film student working on a project about "the death of an actor in the middle of a film shoot," and how that affects the writing and production of a film (p. 12). The narrator explains, "everyone thought the subject was a bit morbid, but that if you really wanted to think about how stories get cobbled together, it was a neat topic. This kind of situation involved taking a fresh look at the balance among all the characters and how their actions played out in time" (p. 12). Keith's interest seems to lie in the way that the extraction of a central, grounding component of the script opens new possibilities and redefines the relationship of the other components of the film. In the end, "classic narrative arcs were suddenly riddled with ellipses, where the viewer was intuitively invited to fill in the blanks, to reconstitute scenes that weren't there. Standard, predictable plotlines would lose their cohesion and became mysterious, leaving viewers with unanswered questions to discuss after they left the theater" (p. 13).

Like many of the writing projects undertaken by characters in *Journée américaine*, Keith's project resonates with certain aspects of Montalbetti's narrative.[10] Like the cobbled-together script, Montalbetti playfully solicits the reader's collaborative efforts in the composition of the narrative, asking for our thoughts and reflections, and therefore implying that our own histories and perspectives have a role in the construction of meaning. That kind of openness, involving something that takes place after leaving the theater or closing the book, draws the environment into the text. Beyond that, the balancing act that interests Keith—one where a scriptwriter shifts the roles and relations of the characters in the absence of a grounding or stabilizing figure—evokes the narrative mesh of Montalbetti's novel. We end up with something that feels like a narrative ecosystem of interdependent characters and stories, rather than a narrative that revolves around the plight of a central protagonist. We have the sense that the "handsome brute of a farmer," Linda's sister's husband, no matter how peripheral he seems, might indeed have some bearing on Linda's decision to leave Tom Lee, and thus Tom Lee's decision to live by himself on a ranch in Colorado, where Donovan heads on his road trip (p. 117). The narrator's insistence on enlarging the circle suggests that we need to have a broader, more total vision if we want to have any sense of the particulars. The characters and stories exist in relation to one another. As Morton writes, the mesh consists not just of organisms, but of the interrelations of those organisms—of "infinite connections and infinitesimal differences" (Morton 2010b, p. 30).[11]

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[9] See Motte's chapter for a developed discussion of intrusive narrators, the role of the narratee, and other narratological concepts that are important in understanding the relationship of the diegetic levels of the text.

[10] When I say "resonate," I do not necessarily mean that the narrator identifies with all or any of the various metafictions—just that they have similar concerns. Tom Lee writes a number of novels, and Donovan also writes one that clearly mirrors the road trip novel we are in the process of reading. I will stick to Keith's dissertation, as it relates to the specific questions I am developing.

[11] That perspective reflects the importance of relational ontology in both ecological postmodernism and material ecocriticism. Serpil Opperman describes it as a "sustained attention to interconnected processes that operate as composite agentic assemblies in networks" in order to communicate a "vision of the world's phenomena as being in constant relation with each other" (22).

Journée américaine highlights those connections and differences, creating the sense that the complexity of the characters' lives derives largely from their interactions with others and their environment.

With each chapter of *Journée américaine*, stories accumulate, not just because we meet new characters who relate in one way or another to Tom Lee or Donovan, but because, as Montalbetti insists, "every object contains a story, a tiny epic, that conveys a whole universe [. . .]" (Montalbetti 2015, p. 100). In *Journée américaine*, we sometimes find ourselves seeing things from the perspective of a sugar bowl, a winter coat, a swarm of mosquitoes.[12] Montalbetti points to a few motivations for her interest in objects and their stories, including the desire to "account for the complexity of every instant" (Montalbetti 2015, p. 100). She writes that taking on the perspective of an object, or maybe an insect, allows her to "talk about powerful feelings, painful ones in many cases" (p. 99)—implying that sharing works best when detaching the feelings from her own voice and perspective. Regardless, the depiction of a world where objects are "storied matter," to use a term employed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in *Material Ecocriticism*, participates in the de-centering of the text, encouraging us to think about narrative and textuality in broader ways (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, p. 1). Iovino and Oppermann describe "a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (p. 2). They connect this idea to Latour's collectives: "the world's phenomena are segments of a conversation between human and manifold nonhuman beings, which act together and 'exchange properties' in indissoluble 'collectives'" (p. 4). The material mesh described by Iovino and Oppermann takes shape in *Journée américaine*; the circle of relations grows larger, extending beyond the stories of seemingly peripheral characters, based on the narrative potential of nonhuman organisms and objects.

Journée américaine demonstrates an interest in the stories and perspectives of objects, perhaps especially when Donovan enters a thrift store, observing "a jumble of items that rustle with stories, whispering the names of the places they came from and what string of misadventures landed them in this place" (p. 150). The attention to objects sometimes feels like a challenge to anthropocentrism, as the narrator asks us to consider the specific history of an object, like the "tagine dish which, if it's an original, must have a considerable odyssey behind it" (p. 150). Tom Lee has a story, but so does that dish. At other times, the narrator's observations feel like a projection, humanizing the objects, perhaps in an effort to express her own feelings, or to create a basis for connection:

> Every item in the shop is a tale of woe, a litany of abandonments and adoptions, of endless shunting from one house to the next, a different owner each time, only to end up huddled and shivering on these shelves as we look on; while some appear to be soliciting our sympathy, still believing in their powers of seduction, despite patches and cracks, others have clearly given up, all bashed in and broken, turned in on themselves like pathological introverts, not realizing that they still have a chance, because it's just like you to forgo the more able-bodied and fall for a poor wretch reliving its halcyon days that you'd love to revive. (p. 152).

Though this passage feels like it might reflect the narrator more than the object itself, the notion that the object is not completely *other* than the human subject collapses the subject/object binary in some ways. As Latour writes, "So long as humanism is constructed through contrast with the object that has been abandoned to epistemology, neither the human nor the nonhuman can be understood" (Latour 1993, p. 136). Maintaining the absolute otherness of nonhuman objects not only prevents our understanding of the enmeshment of humans and nonhumans, but it also fails to create a basis for connecting with nonhumans. As Jane Bennett contends in *Vibrant Matter*, "a touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materiality that form confederations" (Bennett 2010, p. 99). The narrator gets pulled into the way that the items in the shop

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[12] Montalbetti's interest in objects and nonhuman animals appears in many of her works. The novel, *Western*, opens by following the plight of a line of ants. She also wrote an entire play featuring conversations between an apple peeler, a sewing kit, an umbrella, an amulet, and a lamp (La Conférence des objets, Paris: P.O.L., 2019).

have experienced "abandonments and adoptions," now left on the shelf with an uncertain future. Seeing the objects from that perspective makes space for relation, for an exchange between human and nonhuman that rejects subject-object positioning.

Tom Lee probably goes beyond a "touch of anthropomorphism" when we "see him in dialogue with his coffee pot, long face-time chats, with the pot looking best in profile (let's call it a she, shall we?)" (p. 83). In this case, Tom Lee presumably seeks companionship and conversation, isolated from other humans in his life alone on the ranch. He chooses to speak to objects, in particular, because they "offer no hope of any kind of reaction" (p. 67)—unlike his horse, Robert, to whom he refuses to talk, seeing such communication with animals as "devious" and "complicated with what we expect in return" (p. 67). For Tom Lee, objects like the coffee pot, the sugar bowl, and the Remington typewriter can hold space for whatever he needs to express. The Remington clearly has a story of its own, as Tom Lee finds it at the ranch among "a jumble of mostly useless junk," its past making it "a little grimy but still in working order" (p. 85). Tom Lee, though, mostly concerns himself with the story that begins once he finds the object: "Starting today, we're in a long-term relationship, you and me [. . .]" (p. 86). The narrator calls this his "most intense relationship," and later adds, "at least they would live out their chaotic story together under the porch roof" (p. 85, p. 86). Along with the playful anthropomorphism, I do think we see a serious reflection on the sense of companionship we might have in regard to the nonhuman "stuff" with which we share space.

As far as Robert is concerned, though, Tom Lee swears he remains silent, believing that speaking to the horse constitutes an ethical violation, a failure to "respect his anonymity" (p. 67).[13] Tom Lee believes that talking to a horse, even calling him by his name, appropriates the horse, bringing him into the human world and giving him a sense of individuality or personality. According to Tom's theory, horses are better off when left alone, able to "go about their business as daily necessity required, without wondering who they are, sheltered from the vast masquerade of likeness and imitation, without risking the kind of alienation that results from hanging out with the clothed species whose interests do not necessarily match their own, and assenting to engage in their modes of communication" (p. 68). Tom has valid concerns about anthropomorphizing and appropriating nonhuman animals in ways that do not respect their needs and desires, but we also begin to see that his theory circles back to anthropocentrism—chiefly because it seems to communicate his own feelings and experiences about interacting with humans, and also because it tends to see animals as having a sort of blankness or indifference because they do not return our gaze in a way that feels accessible. For Tom, "Whatever is going through Robert's head remains a mystery. He looks at you with an impenetrable blankness that's sometimes hard to take on days when you're feeling all by your lonesome" (p. 71). Robert does not always offer the kind of companionship that Tom Lee desires, and, though he might find it easy to forgive a coffee pot or typewriter for not conversing with him, the horse disappoints, precisely because he gives the impression that "you're just not someone worth interacting with" (p. 71). Tom recognizes that something is "going on behind that muzzle, those jaws, that forelock," but it remains inaccessible, making him feel excluded and alienated. For that reason, Tom justifies his decision not to talk to Robert, to return his gaze.

The narrator, for her part, appears to agree with aspects of Tom Lee's argument, but she also distinguishes her own perspective in a number of ways. She shares Tom Lee's sense that animals get pulled into their human companions' lives in complicated, maybe even confusing, ways. She points out that "they end up, since they have no other point of comparison, believing they're human

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[13] The question of what constitutes an ethical relation between human and nonhuman animals has drawn the attention of many thinkers, including Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, whom I discuss in the paper. Mary Midgley's *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1998) addresses the question in a way that ties it into broader issues of ethics and discrimination in human societies, challenging the tendency to marginalize issues of animal rights. As Mackenzie and Posthumus explain, Jocelyn Porcher is an influential thinker in France in regard to the ethical treatment of animals and the concept of "shared suffering" (Mackenzie and Posthumus 2015, p. xvi).

too" (p. 68). At the same time, the narrator rejects the separation or distinction between human and nonhuman animals that Tom Lee attempts to impose. Her thinking reflects contemporary perspectives on animals that, according to Posthumus and Louisa Mackenzie, offer "theoretical reconfigurations of the animal-human divide" and question the privileging of humans over other animals (Mackenzie and Posthumus 2015, xvi). While Tom Lee wants to attribute blankness and unresponsiveness to horses, the narrator argues that, with certain animals, "You look at them, and not only do you sense that they're thinking about something, but you have the distinct impression that they're getting their thoughts across" (p. 69). Further, the expressiveness of "the crinkled skin above their eyes" communicates their thoughts in a transparent way—"it's not a mystery, what they're thinking about, you could produce an accurate transcript every time" (p. 69). One simply has to be willing, it seems, to imagine the world from the perspective of the animal, rather than assuming that it lacks the capacity for thoughtfulness, desire, or companionship. The narrator herself does this, launching into a digression where she imagines a cat or a dog positioned "in front of a hole in a wall into which they're pretty sure they saw something small and mobile disappear" (p. 70). Whether the narrator can accurately depict the experience, motivations, and thought process of the cat or dog fretting over the critter that has disappeared into the hole, the gesture itself remains important. She eventually concludes, "when you see how they look at you sometimes, be they lizards or birds or what have you, we might well wonder whether they aren't the ones who are trying to communicate with us, and not the other way around" (p. 101).

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway explores the question of companionship, largely focusing on the relation between human and nonhuman "companion species" (Haraway 2008, p. 16). Early in the text, Haraway engages with Jacques Derrida's anecdote about an encounter with his cat—an anecdote that propels him into a reflection on the impossibility of shared suffering between human and nonhuman animals in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2008). Haraway argues that Derrida "identified the key question as being not whether the cat could 'speak' but whether it is possible to know what *respond* means and how to distinguish a response from a reaction, for human beings as well as for anyone else" (p. 20). While Haraway takes interest in the "key question" posed by Derrida, her response differs, largely because she focuses on the possibility of "becoming with" companion species, in our relations with them—unlike Derrida, who, as Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield explains, "advocates a 'negative compassion' whose ethical power lies in in the inability to identify with another's pain" (Arnould-Bloomfield 2015, p. 1468). Haraway contends that Derrida, feeling vulnerable in his cat's presence, "did not seriously consider an alternative form of engagement either, one that risked knowing something more about cats and *how to look back*, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and *therefore* also philosophically and intimately" (p. 20). From Haraway's perspective, Derrida stops short, not problematically identifying with or appropriating the cat's experience, but also not considering the possibilities of how he and the cat might engage with one another on different terms. Arnould-Bloomfield imagines a more curious encounter, based on Haraway's perspective: "Greetings between Derrida and his cat, then, would have meant communicating together about the relationship, its status, its change. It would have meant ritually making signs—not 'making sense'—about a common 'becoming with'" (p. 1473).

The narrator of *Journée américaine*, rather than seeing the absence of human language as an inability to respond, considers other ways that animals communicate—a furrowed brow, for example. Her interest in reading such expressions or gestures reveals a deep desire for an "exchange of glances" (p. 102). She wants the lizard on her terrace to know, through this exchange, that she is "nothing but curious and attentive to its way of seeing things, of getting on in life" (p. 102). The narrator demonstrates her commitment to communicating her goodwill and curiosity in the narrative itself, devoting, for example, almost an entire chapter to the perspective of a swarm of mosquitoes at a football game. In other words, the narrative plays out the narrator's personal philosophy on how we, as humans, might relate to nonhuman animals—precisely by imagining their perspectives and stories, taking interest in what it means to share space with other living things. Haraway contends that

Derrida's failure to imagine represents the shortcoming of his text: "but with his cat, Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning" (Haraway 2008, p. 20). One could argue that Tom fails in a similar way—feeling turned away by the impenetrability of Robert's gaze, Tom concludes that communication and understanding are not possible, rather than considering other potential forms of engagement and demonstrating curiosity about another's experience.

Like we saw in Montalbetti's treatment of objects in the text, her narrative refuses to see nonhuman animals as *other*, in a position that opposes the human subject. Animals have stories and perspectives; it is problematic to collapse or erase the difference between human and nonhuman animals (the narrator agrees with Tom here), but it also presents problems to uphold a binary that puts the two groups into separate spheres. Morton argues that both positions tend towards anthropocentrism: "the position of hunting for anthropomorphism *is anthropomorphism*. To claim that someone's distinction of animals and humans is anthropocentric, because she privileges reason over passion, is to deny reason to nonhumans. We can't in good faith cancel the difference between humans and nonhumans. Nor can we preserve it. Doing both at the same time would be inconsistent" (Morton 2010b, p. 76). Of course, the othering of the animal world, as if distinct from the human world, ignores the ways that humans and animals, Tom Lee and Robert, are already enmeshed in a variety of ways. Tom's commitment to letting the horse go about his life without pulling him into the human world raises a number of issues. Robert, a domesticated horse living on a ranch, is far from a wild animal, separate from humans. Notions of "wilderness," as Morton discusses, often ignore the ways that human and nonhuman lives are tied to one another (Morton 2010b, p. 75)—whether we consider the breeding of horses over centuries for domestic purposes, or the fact that Tom feeds Robert and keeps him within a fenced space. The narrator of *Journée américaine* desires connection with animals, but, unlike Tom Lee, she does not throw up her hands, concluding that trying to relate to Robert, or any other animal, is both pointless and potentially harmful to the animal. Instead, she turns to narrative, as a tool for imagining other points of view, and for challenging the assumption that stories necessarily originate with human subjects. In that way, *Journée américaine* demonstrates a sort of ecological thinking—in its challenge to anthropocentrism and to the opposite tendency of othering nonhuman animals, and in the diverse narrative ecosystem that develops out of that challenge.

Landscapes also play an important role in *Journée américaine*. Like objects and animals, landscapes figure into the broad narrative mesh, often depicted in ways that suggest their agency, and their relation to the characters. The narrator offers an extended reflection on how Linda takes strength from the perseverance of the sea, even as she battles the winds when walking along the shoreline (p. 111). Additionally, we find Tom Lee reading the expressions of mountain faces, seeing an "ironic look," or a "sullen cloudy-day scowl" (p. 96). Beyond those interactions, landscapes in the novel play on the relation between natural settings and aesthetics. As we saw earlier, Morton identifies ecological art's interest in incorporating setting or context into the work of art, blurring the line between art and environment. Montalbetti draws attention to the blurring of that line as well, though the novel also encourages us to consider the reverse of what Morton describes: the way "natural" settings—at least the ways we perceive and depict those settings—incorporate or reflect art. In an essay called "The Uses of Landscape," Alison Byerly discusses how the development of the American National Park System, particularly in western regions of the country, reflects the picturesque aesthetic popular in landscape painting at the time the system came about. Her work provides a compelling example of the way that our concepts of wilderness and natural beauty derive from artistic practices that are then projected onto the land.[14] Returning to Morton, we might note his insistence that "Nature" is a mythic construct

[14] Byerly sees the projection of aesthetic ideas onto the land in a negative light in the development of the National Park System, because it determined policy guiding the protection of certain spaces. In other words, policies reflected aesthetic constructs

that we tend to accept as "a reified thing in the distance," and that the work of shedding light on the enmeshment of the natural and cultural—their inextricability—characterizes the ecological thought (Morton 2010b, p. 3).

Journée américaine reflects on the complex interrelation of natural settings and aesthetic ideas, specifically in its depictions of landscapes—depictions that overtly reflect the processes of painting and filming. For example, the narrator describes the way Tom Lee walks Robert around the corral as "a kind of long tracking shot as they moved slowly forward, with the occasional bumpy section, always leaving the fence in the foreground and the mountains in back, whatever the angle" (p. 38). She imagines Tom Lee and Robert in cinematic terms, thinking about the best shot to capture the movement, along with the arrangement of the figures in the frame. In the same chapter, the narrator tells us of Donovan's visits to the ranch, where he and Tom Lee revel in the colors of the sunset: "they get all caught up in it, on days when the show is especially colorful, when it basks you in ocher and amaranth, coming at you with big broad brushstrokes, laying the majesty on thick, and how about a dash of Tyrian purple, and splat, here's a squirt of lilac" (p. 40). Here we see language that explicitly evokes painting, referring to the application of paint to a canvas and describing colors typically associated with dyes or paints. The narrator imagines the landscapes through the lens of visual art and cinema, making clear the ways that her perception and depiction of the setting reflects aesthetic forms and ideas as much as they might reflect, in some theoretically objective way, a particular physical place.

In addition, the narrator describes settings in ways that reflect her aesthetic sensibility as she recounts Donovan's trip through Oklahoma and Colorado. When he leaves town and enters the rural landscape, the narrator describes the land in terms that evoke how one engages with the lines of a composition, considering how the composition presents itself to the gaze of the viewer: "trees grow scarcer, just the bare minimum really, mostly shrubs, anything that would introduce a bit of verticality here and there into all that horizontality, the infinite plan, where fences provide the only feature that lifts the gaze" (p. 42). The narrator's desire for a balanced composition comes through here, as she contemplates the implications of the vast flatness unfolding endlessly into the distance. In *Eco-Aesthetics*, Malcolm Miles discusses the aesthetic experience of landscapes, noting, "it is important to remember that Beauty is a construct, not a natural property (or quality in the scientific sense) of matter" (Miles 2014, p. 50). Montalbetti's narrator draws attention to the constructs that shape her experience of the land and make her aware of her own presence within the landscape. She notes the presence of the road in the landscape, as it defines both the layout of the land and the driver's place in it: "the road continues to cleave the landscape, and you drive through what has become your medium, following the blacktopped strip that has come to define a left and a right. And also, yes, a front, where you're heading, and a back, where you've been, a receding undulation. The car is the measure of all things, organizing the space through which it moves" (p. 89). Thus the viewer becomes part of the landscape, traveling the paved surface of the U.S. highway system that makes it possible to traverse an incredibly vast space, while organizing the landscape through that travel. In this way, Montalbetti's novel refuses to present the expansive, open spaces of Oklahoma and Colorado as "untouched," mythic wilderness, but insists upon the way our perception and interaction with these spaces necessarily construct them in specific ways—often reflecting aesthetic concerns.[15]

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of beauty and wilderness, all while perpetuating the illusion that visitors could visit pristine, untouched spaces that were protected from human incursion (Byerly 1996).

[15] In a paper on Montalbetti's *Expérience de la campagne*, Caroline Whiteman argues that the novel juxtaposes domestic spaces with natural settings, contending that the latter resist human attempts to comprehend them. She writes, "unfettered and irregular, natural spaces resist man-made constraints. Their uneven contours do not obey the dictates of geometry and they are not receptive to the neat circles and squares that humans attempt to impose on them to give them order and meaning" (Whiteman 2018, p. 430). While analyzing depictions of particular settings in *Expérience de la campagne* lies outside my paper, it's important to note that such a reading conflicts with my argument about how *Journée américaine* depicts landscapes. As the examples I provide show, the narrator's gaze organizes and aestheticizes the space she perceives, demonstrating the role of art in the ways we interact with any given landscape.

Brand makes the case that *Journée américaine* incorporates imagery from American road novels and road movies, like *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*[16]. According to Brand, Montalbetti includes "scenes such as a picturesque view through the rear windshield," as a nod to the road novel or movie, and then moves on to fulfill her own purposes (p. 227). Montalbetti writes that the imagery in *Journée américaine* derives from her actual experiences with American landscapes, rather than from cinematic depictions. She cites the westerns of Sergio Leone as inspiration for the landscapes depicted in her novel, *Western*, and compares them to the landscapes in *Journée américaine*, which "come from my physical confrontation with American landscapes".[17] Some imaginary settings remain: "Tom Lee's ranch, or the places associated with Linda Burn and her family. But most of the settings are directly inspired by material collected during my writing residency. [. . .] In order to evoke the landscapes that pass through Donovan's field of vision, I used images of Route 66 that I filmed from the car" (p. 180). Montalbetti insists on the material reality of the places she references in *Journée américaine*, rather than suggesting that the landscapes depicted only exist in the fictional world she creates. Bertrand Westphal analyzes the relationship between literary representations of place and the real world in *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, rejecting more formalist readings of literary landscapes that disconnect them from the material world. He argues that "the fictional place takes part in a variable relationship with the real," and later asserts, "fiction does not mimic reality, but [. . .] actualizes new virtualities hitherto unexpressed, which then *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces" (Westphal 2015, pp. 99, 103).[18] That back-and-forth between fiction and the material world seems to interest Montalbetti, who neither conflates the two spheres nor denies the compelling ways they engage one another.

Perhaps part of the point here is that our experiences in the world are necessarily filtered through our experiences with art, and vice versa. At least to a certain degree, we see landscapes in the way that art teaches us to see them—as Byerly contends. Hence, we find explicit references to cinema and painting in *Journée américaine*, even if those descriptions do indeed derive from experience in the world, rather than from movies. In addition, while Montalbetti emphasizes the importance of her actual "confrontation" with American landscapes, she notes that she films her experiences on the road and then works from those images. The cinematic language in *Journée américaine* might not stem from Leone's westerns, but it does seem to reflect her own aesthetic framing of the landscape. Montalbetti's narrator cannot help but see the land in artistic terms, as when Donovan spots an oil rig on the horizon: "it looks like performance art, an installation of dynamic sculpture that might signify the pendulum swing, the scansion of time, the urge to access the earth's remotest depths" (p. 89).

Journée américaine, asks us to think about the work of writing. It makes this demand in a way that pushes against the edge of the text, making us aware that the work of writing takes place in the world, constitutes the world, and incorporates the world. The work of writing sprawls, unfolding as a mesh of relations—not just between human characters but also objects, animals, and landscapes, in ways that often emphasize blurred boundaries and mobility. That work demonstrates, in the words of Morton, "the disorienting openness of the ecological thought" (p. 31). At one point in *Journée américaine*, the narrator tells us about a time when Donovan visited Jane's hometown and simply walked around: "he just breathed the air, telling himself that this was the air she was breathing, and that was enough

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[16] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, New York: Viking Press, 1957; *Easy Rider*, dir. Peter Fonda, Columbia, 1969.

[17] See Sergio Leone's films *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (United Artists, 1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Paramount, 1968) for examples of the of landscapes Montalbetti evokes in *Western*.

[18] It is relevant to mention that Westphal cites and disagrees with Montalbetti's formalist reading of literary representations of place in her book, *Le voyage, le monde et la bibliothèque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997) (pp. 92–94). As Motte mentions in his work on Montalbetti, her work as a critic and her work as a novelist sometimes present different visions of the relationship of text and context. Motte focuses on the theoretical relationship between writer and reader—a relationship, he argues, that Montalbetti deems impossible in her critical work, yet seeks to establish in her novels (Motte 2017, p. 123). I think we can apply the same point to her understanding of literary representations of place. Westphal's comments about her formalism do not seem to apply to what we see in *Journée américaine*, especially since she insists on the relationship of the landscapes in the novel to her actual experience driving the road that Donovan takes.

for him" (p. 54). Donovan delights in the idea of sharing space, no matter how indirectly. When we think of the world, or the text, as opening, all space is shared space. Montalbetti gestures toward that openness in a number of ways, creating a text that allows us to share space, even if indirectly, with her and her narrator, the mesh of characters and their relations, and the landscapes that unfold with the narrative. We thus see and experience how the ecological can take shape in the work of writing.

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