

Chapter 5

Thirty-One Stories for Thirty-One Different Animal and Plant Species. *Voyages en sol incertain* by Matthieu Duperrex

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Abstract

Duperrex's volume *Voyages en sol incertain. Enquête dans les deltas du Rhône et du Mississippi* (2019) is situated within an inter- and trans-disciplinary ecopoetic debate that French ecological activism has been utilizing for several years to give voice to the renewed dialogue between human and non-human — or better said, following Bruno Latour, between *vivant* and *non-vivant* — and to decisively affirm the urgency and non-negotiability of human action in response to the ecological emergencies we witness daily. The book describes two fluvial territories that strongly characterize and represent the South of France and of the United States. The Rhône and Mississippi deltas are indeed the scene of major ecological, historical, industrial, sociological, and political challenges. The study, after highlighting the structure of the book and the intermedial dialogue that the text establishes with the iconographic part, will focus on the mechanisms of the stories, the link they weave with the species to which they are matched, and the consequent multispecies dialogue they advocate, concluding with the concept of *sédimentation* that Duperrex transforms into a true poetics of nature.

Keywords

Anthropocene; *straniamento* (uncanny); ecopoetics; uncertain landscapes and soils; sentinel landscapes.

Introduction

The volume *Voyages en sol incertain. Enquête dans les deltas du Rhône et du Mississippi* (Duperrex: 2019)¹ is part of an inter- and trans-disciplinary ecopoetic debate that French ecological activism has been using for several years now to give voice to the renewed dialogue between human and non-human or, more accurately, as Bruno Latour (2015) would frame it, between *vivant* and *non vivant*. This debate decisively affirms the urgency and indispensability of human action in response to the ecological crises we witness daily.

In this context, an important critical mass is forming in France, already the protagonist of impactful projects. Notable examples include the performances of Bruno Latour, directed by Frédérique Aït-Touati, culminating in the publication of *Trilogie terrestre* (Aït-Touati and Latour 2022). Another example is the *Parlement de Loire* project, animated by the writer Camille de Toledo, which has given as its first result the publication of *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire* (2021)². Additionally, the festival *Agir pour le vivant*³ has reached its fourth edition, and the collective of jurists *Notre affaire à tous* published *Les droits de la nature. Vers un nouveau paradigme de protection du vivant* in 2022, a volume in which a state of the art and a global state of advancement of the issue of the recognition of the legal rights of Nature is reconstructed (Notre affaire à tous 2022).

Within this varied and dynamic framework, the research conducted by Matthieu Duperrex certainly plays a crucial role. As a *Maître de conférences* in *Sciences de l'homme et de la société pour l'architecture* at the University of Aix-Marseille, and founder and artistic director of the *Urbain, trop urbain* collective⁴, Matthieu Duperrex is both an artist and a researcher. He is also animator at the *École de*

1 From now on *VSI* followed by the page number.

2 On De Toledo's volume, see Rolla (2023).

3 From 2020 in Arles, and from 2022 also in Liège and Medellín (Colombia), the festival offers debates, round tables and meetings aimed at raising public awareness of the now pressing problems related to the exploitation of the environment, in an attempt to propose a new model of society that integrates among its priorities «the question of the living, at once human, plant and animal» (APV 2024; «la question du vivant, à la fois humain, végétal et animal»; all the translations of French texts are my own). The festival in 2023 took place for the first time in Africa, in Cameroon, and in 2025 it will also take place in Japan.

4 «Led by Matthieu Duperrex and Claire Dutrait, *Urbain, trop urbain* has been working since 2010 to capture the current metamorphoses of the city and the world through resolutely subjective artistic and cultural practices, whether poetic or reflexive. Through documented journeys using text, sound and images, and digital, artistic and bibliographic monitoring, the collective offers multiple perspectives on the city and what goes beyond it» (UTU 2019; «Dirigé par Matthieu Duperrex et par Claire Dutrait, *Urbain, trop urbain* se propose depuis 2010 de saisir les métamorphoses actuelles de la ville et du monde par des pratiques artistiques et culturelles résolument subjectives, qu'elles soient poétiques ou réflexives. Par des parcours documentés au moyen du texte, du son et de l'image, de la veille numérique, artistique et bibliographique, le collectif propose des regards multiples sur la ville et ce qui la dépasse»).

l'Anthropocène, set up within the *École Urbaine de Lyon* (University of Lyon)⁵, an incubator of interdisciplinary research projects, as well as training and economic, social and cultural enhancement of scientific knowledge. Duperrex is also one of the *auditionnés* of the Loire Parliament. His artistic endeavor and his scientific work are based on the investigation of man-made environments and extend to literature, the humanities and the visual and digital arts. One example is *Voyages en sol incertain*, a volume that combines artistic and scientific research by experimenting with a literary narrative that intersects the ecological humanities and the natural sciences. Accompanied by Frédéric Malenfer's inks, the book describes two river territories that strongly characterize and represent the South of France and of the United States. The deltas of the Rhône and Mississippi are, in fact, the scene of great ecological, historical, industrial, sociological, and political challenges.

In his becoming a reporter, ethnographer, anthropologist, and geologist, Duperrex can undoubtedly join those *écrivains-enquêteurs* described by Laurent Demanze (2019). These are writers who, relying on scientific materials and investigations, create works to give visibility and voice to what is known only to specialists or what is deliberately removed and forgotten.

In fact, field research generates artistic and literary forms linked to the concreteness of reality that not only narrate, but also illustrate and show problematic and complex situations, thus soliciting and provoking questions and debates from the reader. For years, Duperrex has conducted research on the so-called *anthropocene rivers*, those watercourses that have been affected by the processes of anthropization and are therefore more exposed to environmental risks. These territories are profoundly hybrid and fragile and therefore emblematic of man's contemporary relationship with the planet. From his river investigations, Duperrex has produced thirty-one short stories, each titled after a different animal or plant species. Balancing theory and narration, the text invents an original form of writing, attentive to the interweaving of *vivant* and *non vivant* and to the narration of contemporary landscapes.

After highlighting the structure, the mechanisms of the narratives, and the multi-species dialogue of which they are the mouthpiece, I will focus on the notion of «sentinel landscape and character», of «uncertain soils» and the centrality and importance that Duperrex attaches to sediments, to the point of transforming their investigation into a veritable poetics of nature.

A Literary Device for «Writing with the Living»

Écrire avec les vivants (Camelin 2023): I borrow the title of a recently published collection of essays because it is emblematic of the thinking behind Matthieu

5 See AEA (2024).

Duperrex's project. The starting hypothesis of the book is in fact based on the observation of the solidaristic bonds that literature, as a participant in «landscapes, dwellings, places, gestures» (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 40)⁶, must entertain with the living. Literature, attentive to the different forms of life, must contribute to forming and strengthening our consciousness of being «terrestrial among terrestrials» (Latour 2017: 111)⁷, thereby erasing all boundaries between human and non-human. This concept positions literature as a «survival strategy» (Iovino 2006) capable of saving us from extinction (Benedetti 2021), aiding us in overcoming the challenges posed by the ecological crisis, articulating and translating our experience of the world, suggesting ways of living and new ways of experiencing that thin layer of the Earth known as the «critical zone»⁸ on which, for example, Bruno Latour's theatrical performances focus.

Along the lines traced by Marielle Macé, it also seems for Duperrex to be

[...] impossible [...] to consider works without considering the possibilities of being that they support, institute or criticize, without looking at the worlds they open up or spoil, without [taking] an interest above all in the paths of life that they are capable of liberating. (Macé [2011] 2022: 15)⁹

Thus, literature becomes «a space for the production of forces» (Macé [2011] 2022: 71)¹⁰ aimed at sharpening our sensitivity towards the protection of the living — of all living beings — by safeguarding the beauty of their diversity. As Colette Camelin points out, since the end of the twentieth century and in response to the vertiginous acceleration that the degradation and destruction of the environment in which we live has taken, it becomes inescapable and unavoidable for writers and artists to poetically and literally inhabit the landscape (Camelin 2023: 12).

Thus, adopting the *écouménale* perspective formulated by Augustin Berque (1996), Duperrex in *Voyages en sol incertain* narrates the ethical, loving, and vital relationship he established with the two river environments he explored.

Emblematically, the introduction to the volume is entitled «Entrée en matière» because this is indeed what it is about. The stories not only introduce us a delicate *matière* such as the denunciation of the consequences of anthropic impact on fragile environments; they also represent a descent, a penetration into

6 «Des paysages, des demeures, des lieux, des gestes».

7 «Terrestres au milieu des terrestres».

8 «The Earth Critical Zone (ECZ) represents a complex interplay of chemical, biological, physical, and geological processes at the planet's surface, essential for maintaining the ecological balance vital for human existence» (Zhou and Gu 2024).

9 «[...] impossible [...] de considérer les œuvres sans considérer les possibilités d'être qu'elles soutiennent, instituent ou critiquent, sans regarder les mondes qu'elles ouvrent ou qu'elles gâchent, sans [s]'intéresser avant tout aux pistes de vie qu'elles sont capables de libérer».

10 «Un espace de production de forces».

the *matière* of which the silt of the two rivers is made up, into their «uncertain» sedimentary landscapes wounded by the hand of man:

The Rhône Delta, the Mississippi Delta. These territories are created by the river's capricious plume, carrying alluvial deposits from all over the world. The Mississippi river basin covers a third of the United States, while the Rhône basin covers more than a quarter of mainland France. The deltas of these rivers have inherited the depth of the soils that the water licks, penetrates, erodes and rinses away. (*VSI*, 11)¹¹

The book, the fruit and result of two residencies of the author in Louisiana and Marseille in 2015, is available in both print and digital versions. The thirty-one short stories that compose it — thirty-one like the days of the longest months of the year, as if to suggest reading them, or rather taking them daily as a therapy aimed at fostering the reader's ecological awareness? — represent an interweaving of a gallery of living beings with the landscapes that host them. The texts are of a different nature — observational stories, naturalistic descriptions, elegies in free verse, first-person accounts of experience — and in the digital version they open up to non-linear forms of reading that are enriched with additional content, such as photographs, maps, and videos.

The volume is divided into four parts: “Les Spectres”; “Les Résidents”; “Les Sentinelles”; “Les Voyants”. The first three parts consist of nine short stories each, while the fourth contains four stories. To fully understand the narrative mechanisms and plots that underpin the structure of the volume, it is essential to first shed light on the concept of sediment and sedimentation that underlies Duperrex's investigation.

Sentinel Landscapes and Characters: The Toxic Bios

The term *sentinelle* is emblematically listed in the *Dictionnaire critique de l'Anthropocène* (DCA 2020) published by the CNRS. It defines, within the complexity of the anthropocene landscape, everything that watches over and supervises the protection of the environment and is capable of raising prompt alarms¹². This term can designate technological but also living systems capable of detecting «the weak signals of a possible and imminent disaster, signals that are

11 «Delta du Rhône, delta du Mississippi. Ces territoires sont enfantés par le panache capricieux du fleuve charriant les alluvions de tout pays. Le bassin hydrogéographique du Mississippi couvre un tiers du territoire états-unien, celui du Rhône plus d'un quart de la France métropolitaine. Les deltas de ces fleuves héritent de cette profondeur des sols que l'eau lèche, pénètre, érode et rince».

12 The term *sentinelle* is defined together with *lanceur d'alerte* (DCA 2020: 752-753).

not perceptible to humans» (*ibidem*)¹³. The river landscapes of the Rhône and Mississippi deltas and their inhabitants — animals, plants, and minerals — thus become, in the economy of Duperrex's tales, sentinel landscapes and characters, theatres of uncertainty and insecurity unfortunately unheard by most humans¹⁴.

Therefore, referencing Donna Haraway, Duperrex posits that exploring these territories, electing certain species of living beings as our lookouts by listening to them enables us to better *becoming-with*¹⁵, that is, to come to terms with those who, like us, are bound — for better or worse — to that land, that soil.

I still had to find guides, beyond the books and scholarly articles I had devoured, to get to the heart of the “brain of the world” (Walt Whitman). These were the famous intercessors, the bearers of a whole cosmology, the living creatures — animals and plants — who form narrative families: the spectres, the residents, the sentinels and the seers. Then, and only then, could the story begin its journey, taking me along the sedimentary paths of literature. (Duperrex and Cavallin: 2019)¹⁶

13 «Les signaux faibles d'une catastrophe possible et imminente, signaux non perceptibles par les humains».

14 Here's how Duperrex himself defines «sentinel landscapes» in one of his recent studies: «A new type of landscape, characteristic of the Anthropocene, can be described as a “sentinel landscape”, a geological epoch that refers not only to a deleterious monopolisation of the living soil by humans, but also to a double interweaving of the human and the non-human, with natural processes (*biomes*) crossed by the social on the one hand, and societies (*anthromes*) crossed by nature on the other. In addition to the changes it has brought about in the way we think about our relationship with the environment, and the way we translate this into new scientific concepts, the Anthropocene also calls for a new aesthetic order. The notion of the sentinel landscape aims to respond to this call by embodying the second term in the definition of the Anthropocene, namely the now inextricable interweaving of the geological and the historical, the non-human and the human» (Duperrex 2021; «On peut qualifier de “paysage sentinelle” un nouveau type de paysage, caractéristique de l'Anthropocène, une époque géologique qui ne désigne pas seulement un accaparement délétère du sol vivant par les humains, mais aussi un double entrelacement de l'humain et du non-humain, avec d'un côté des processus naturels (biomes) traversés de social et de l'autre côté, des sociétés (anthromes) traversées de nature. Au-delà des mutations induites dans la manière de penser nos relations à l'environnement, de traduire ces dernières au moyen de nouveaux concepts scientifiques, l'Anthropocène appelle aussi une nouvelle donne esthétique. La notion de paysage sentinelle vise à répondre à cet appel en incarnant le second terme de la définition de l'Anthropocène, à savoir cet entrelacement devenu inextricable du géologique et de l'historique, du non-humain et de l'humain»).

15 «Becoming-with, not becoming [...] becoming-with is how partners are [...] rendered capable. Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings. Companion species are relentlessly becoming-with» (Haraway 2016: 12-13).

16 «Il me fallait encore trouver des guides, au-delà des livres et articles savants que j'avais dévorés, pour me rendre au cœur du « cerveau du monde » (Walt Whitman). Ce furent, pour m'y emmener, ces fameux intercesseurs porteurs de toute une cosmologie, ces vivants – animaux et végétaux – qui s'agencent en familles narratives : les spectres, les résidents, les sentinelles

The thirty-one animal and plant species featured in Duperrex's stories are the «existents» of the uncertain soils of the two river deltas. Forced to live in compromised sedimentary soils, they become the protagonists of real *toxic bios*¹⁷ — toxic biographies of living beings —, tales of resistance and struggle rendered by those who experience first-hand and with their own bodies the environmental injustices and consequences of ecological conflicts. Duperrex has chosen them as *intercesseurs*, mediators and guides who accompany the narrator — who expresses himself in the first person singular, *je* — and the reader on a sort of initiatory journey, a descent into the underworld of the sedimentary layers of the two deltas. The use of the first person allows Duperrex to define his narrator not only as a traveller-witness, but as the protagonist of a true coming-of-age story. The rejection of zero focus emphasizes to the reader the importance of the narrator's personal, sensitive and phenomenological experience of the world. Duperrex thus claims a position of «attention and listening» to the spaces investigated and the beings that inhabit them. Far from an idea of supremacy, he seeks to embody an impermanent attitude, characterized by slowness and decantation, which in this way tends to approach the geological processes of sedimentation and the patient attitude of animals.

The four parts, or to borrow Duperrex's definition, the four «familles narratives» (*VSI*, 29) that make up the book — “Les Spectres”, “Les Résidents”; “Les Sentinelles”, “Les Voyants” — are made up of animals or plants designated by their binomial Latin names. This approach potentially links them together, smoothing out differences and pre-eminences in favour of four large families of «intercessors»:

The “spectres” first help us measure the losses. “Residents” accompany us as we explore new territories. “Sentinels” are ahead of us, heralding turbulence and crisis. Finally, the “seers” initiate us into powerful rituals. (*VSI*, 29)¹⁸

Each story features a title paired with the Latin name of an animal or plant species, and each of the four parts is punctuated, in an almost perfect alternation, by stories set in French river territory and tales of the Mississippi Delta. The survey is organized as a sort of «galerie de portraits» in which emphasis is

et les voyants. Alors, et alors seulement, le récit a pu commencer son chemin et m'embarquer dans les voies sédimentaires de la littérature...».

17 The expression is borrowed from the name of a portal devised and launched by Marco Armiero and Ilenia Iengo, two Italian researchers working at the Laboratory of Environmental Humanities at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm University (Armiero and Iengo, n.d.).

18 «Les «spectres» nous font d'abord mesurer les pertes. Les «résidents» nous accompagnent dans l'exploration des nouveaux territoires. Les «sentinelles» nous devancent et sont annonciatrices des turbulences et des crises. Les «voyants» nous initient enfin à de puissants rituels».

placed each time on the relationship that each living protagonist of the story — i.e., each character-sentinel — has with an aspect of the territory analyzed. In an interview with the magazine *Diacritik*, Duperrex mentions a real «sentiment géographique» that stems from the encounter between his writing (*graphein*) with time and its sedimentation in the earth (*géo*) (Cavallin: 2019). In this process, the living, the sentinel characters, reveal themselves as the best mediators/translators of an otherwise opaque language. Following in the footsteps of Jean-Christophe Bailly¹⁹, they thus make it possible to bring out the invisible, to practice this «cure de vision» (Jurado: 2020) that Duperrex advocates and presents as a method to be able to perceive «background noises, labile things, in the vertigo of time» (*ibidem*)²⁰. The sentinel-characters of Duperrex's tales thus become «the ghosts of the Anthropocene that guide the description of the geological work of modernity» (*ibidem*)²¹.

«Black Matter Lives» or For a Poetics of Sediments

I have borrowed the subtle wordplay used in the title of this paragraph from a study by Duperrex published in 2016, just before the publication of the volume I am reflecting on. His research starts by comparing the geological, industrial, and ecosystem configurations of the Rhône and Mississippi deltas, referred to as two *fleuves travailleurs* by the nineteenth-century geographer Élisée Reclus (1866; quoted in Le Lay 2008). In fact, they belong to those rivers that, at the end of their course, write, or rather «calligraphy along the coast of rich lemon deltas» (Cavallin 2019)²². Thus, the deltas become their memory, a living archive of the territories they have traversed, of the roughness they have crossed even in a broader perspective that opens up to the contribution of their tributaries:

From the movement [...] of suspended particles to the physical expanse that we rightly call a “deposit”, since the residual then becomes an *archive*, a *poïétique* of water is expressed [...] which is a hybrid of matter and culture. (*VSI*, 22-23)²³

19 «Each animal inhabits the network of appearances in its own way, i.e., it hides within it» (Bailly 2009, *Le visible est le caché*; «Chaque animal habite le réseau des apparences à sa façon, c'est-à-dire qu'il s'y cache»).

20 «Des bruits de fond, des choses labiles, dans le vertige du temps».

21 «des fantômes de l'Anthropocène qui guident pour décrire le travail géologique de la modernité».

22 «Calligraphient sur la côte de riches deltas de limon». The image of the writing river certainly evokes the title of the volume *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire* (De Toledo 2021), a project in which Duperrex was involved.

23 «Du mouvement [...] des particules en suspension jusqu'à cette étendue physique qu'on appelle très justement «dépôt», puisque le résiduel devient alors *archive*, s'exprime une poïétique de l'eau [...] qui est un hybride de matière et de culture».

In *Voyages en sol incertain* the author reconstructs the history, or rather the archaeology, of sedimentary terrains, which thus becomes a paradigm of life's manifestations. Over the years, sediments shift and settle, forming fertile but fragile territories, a refuge for incredible biodiversity; erosion affects these lands, leading to their gradual disappearance, which inevitably entails the loss of life and cultures (plant, animal, and human) that they once sustained. In front of this «palimpsest of turbulence» (Cavallin 2019)²⁴, humans are not mere spectators, but rather engrave with concrete and cement of their artefacts, becoming the cause or instrument of acceleration of erosive phenomena. This is particularly true if we consider human practices that are so widespread in the South of France and of the United States such as hydraulic constructions, drainage, dredging, and mining activities with consequent industrial pollution of water and soil.

Therefore, the narratives that make up the volume, true *récits-paysages*, describe and gloss the river-human dialogue, emphasizing the conflict between the former's capacity for ingenious improvisation and the latter's desire to rationalize and regiment the uncertainty and extemporaneousness that arise from those improvisations. The result is a narrative that stages the encounter/clash between the violent anthropization of those territories and the living but silent memory of those rivers represented by their sediments. This epic and solemn tale narrates and describes the elaboration of a new grief, a contemporary *mal du siècle* — the *solastalgia* — an anguish that «afflicts those who have suffered an environmental tragedy caused by man's clumsy intervention in nature» (Treccani 2018, s.v. “solastalgia”; my translation).

The Rhône and Mississippi deltas thus become the starting point for an investigation into one of the many aspects of the Anthropocene, namely the brutal impact of anthropic transformation of watercourses on surrounding landscapes and sedimentary and wetland ecosystems. Through this original way of exploring the landscape, Duperrex understands how inexorable and inextricable the process of natural sedimentation is now with the anthropized one: «The first lesson to be learned from sediments is that it has become very difficult to consider a strict division between nature and artifice» (Duperrex and Cavallin: 2019)²⁵.

The Anthropocene portrayed by Duperrex thus evokes the «quiet apocalypse» described by Serenella Iovino:

It does not come with a meteorite from outer space, but it crawls slowly into the planet's systems from within. Via the technosphere, it infiltrates the atmosphere, the biosphere, the lithosphere and, moving all the way up to the semiosphere, it

24 «Palimpseste de turbulences».

25 «Une première leçon des sédiments est donc qu'il est devenu très difficile d'y considérer un partage strict entre la nature et l'artifice».

reveals this simple truth: we have become sedimenting agents, makers of new fossils and new fossils in-the-making. (Iovino 2017: 315)

Like the sediments it investigates, the book presents itself as a space for researching and developing a hybrid form of writing that accounts for the richness and variety of the life forms that inhabit these territories. It represents a true poetics of sediments, nourished by the forms and languages of the animals, plants, and mineral forms it contains. This aesthetic research also translates the brutal anthropic forces that manipulate and alter those river landscapes. From the scientific and documentary approach that constitutes its foundation, the book draws inspiration to create its narrative dimension, wherein the protagonists — the living creatures — illustrate to the reader how to physically and poetically experience those sedimentary river soils. In this pact with the reader, Frédéric Malenfer's inks act as a support, and expansion, synergistically combining with the text to become an integral part of its communicative structure. They consolidate the conveyed message, giving it the strength and incisiveness of a true icon-text²⁶. These illustrations propose a synthetic and essential image of the evoked animal or plant, capturing its form and highlighting the grace and energy it conveys.

Uncertain Landscapes and Soils of the South

«The contemporary writer would be more *uncertain*, prey to doubt, devoted to the obscure practices of investigation», states Dominique Viart in his *La Littérature française au présent* (Viart, Vercier, and Evrard 2008: 315; italics mine)²⁷. Uncertainty, insecurity, and precariousness seem to be the hallmark of contemporary society, and literature cannot but reflect this condition. Within the porous and fragile landscape of current French prose, the practice of investigation, of enquiry (*enquête*) so present in the writing of many authors of this first part of the twenty-first century appears to be one of the possible answers to contemporary precariousness. This renewed *âge de l'enquête*²⁸, reminiscent of Zola's time, expresses the desire to decipher and investigate reality and translates into a renewed interest in the investigation of *terrain*. The *littératures de terrain*²⁹ — Fieldwork Literatures³⁰ — can be translated, according to Dominique Viart, into documentary narratives, collections of interviews, *enquêtes de terrain*

26 For a definition of icon-texts see in particular Alain Montandon (1990a; 1990b) and Giuseppe Carrara (2017).

27 «L'écrivain contemporain serait plus *incertain*, en proie au doute, voué aux pratiques obscures de l'enquête».

28 The formula «l'âge de l'enquête» is used by Zola to characterise his era in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880: 293).

29 Cf. Viart (2019).

30 Cf. Viart (2015; 2016; 2018).

precisely, alternative forms that intersect the factual and the fictional, venturing beyond the boundary between literature, the social sciences and the hard sciences.

Duperrex can then be counted among the ranks of those *écrivains-enquêteurs* described as follows by Ivan Jablonka:

Blessed are the prophets, the soothsayers, the visionary poets, the writer-shamans! But if you're not one of the chosen few, you still have the chance to be an investigator, a militant, a surveyor, a *histôr*, a witness, a scribe, a "scrivain" as Perec calls it, a researcher on the trail of what has been lost, or of worlds that have collapsed, or of structures we can't see, or of people we've forgotten. [...] The democratization of knowledge is undoing the "sacredness of the writer". It opens up to the masses the cenacles of the *happy few* and the seminars of the specialists. (Jablonka 2014: 314)³¹

As part of a vast process of democratization of literature and the social sciences, and somewhere between the role of witness and scribe, Duperrex ventures into fragile and uncertain terrain to give voice, through fiction, to those who have none, those living whose existence has been severely compromised by human action. These also include those life forms that are usually described as «unworthy» or harmful: I am thinking of parasites such as the cochineal *Nipponaclerda bivakoensis* that plagues Louisiana³² or the *Naegleria fowleri*³³, a very dangerous amoeba that lives in the ever-warming waters of rivers; of harmful insects such as the yellow fever mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*)³⁴ or animals that are dangerous to humans, such as the *Alligator mississippiensis*³⁵.

Recently in France, several initiatives have been dedicated to the exploration of the *paysages incertains*. I am thinking, for example, of a seminar held at the EHESS (*École des hautes études en sciences sociales*) by the literary historian Marielle Macé during the 2020-2021 academic year and titled precisely "Paysages incertains (enquêtes, récits, poèmes)" (Macé 2021a) and her lecture in Marseille in November 2021 titled "Paysages incertains" (Macé 2021b). There are also two events in Strasbourg in December 2021 titled "Contemporary Ruins/Les ruines contemporaines" (Contemporary Ruins 2021) followed by the conference (October 2022) titled "Paysages incertains: représentations et pratiques

31 «Heureux les prophètes, les devins, poètes-voyants, écrivains-chamans ! Mais, si l'on ne fait pas partie de ces élus, on a toujours la possibilité d'être un enquêteur, un militant, un arpenteur, un *histôr*, un témoin, un scribe, un « scrivain » comme dit Perec, un chercheur parti sur les traces de ce qu'il a perdu, ou des mondes qui ont sombré, ou des structures qu'on ne voit pas, ou des gens qu'on a oubliés. [...] La démocratisation du savoir défait le "sacre de l'écrivain". Elle ouvre à la foule les cénacles des *happy few* et les séminaires des spécialistes».

32 Protagonist of the story "La part Maudite" (*VSI*, 155-158).

33 Protagonist of the story "La purge des canalisations" (*VSI*, 97-100).

34 Protagonist of the story "*Aedes aegypti*, ou le rituel de l'air" (*VSI*, 168-170).

35 Protagonist of the story "Le réseau noir" (*VSI*, 133-138).

de l'espace à l'heure de l'anthropocène" (Uncertain Landscapes 2022a), which extended into an exhibition of young artists (Uncertain Landscapes 2022b).

But what does it mean to live in an uncertain world, in ruins, «abîmé» as Marielle Macé (2019) defines it? How are these *paysages incertains* characterized? Making the French scholar's words our own, we could say that they are not necessarily hostile, polluted or lacking in beauty; they are uncertain because they are ambiguous, unreadable, confused, suspicious. These are unstable and precarious environments, theatres of great intertwining of life and death lines, interwoven with waste, ghosts, oblivion, contamination, dangers, but also with rebirths, potentialities, surprises. These are landscapes that do not clearly define their direction or identity, that we do not always know how to define, let alone to perceive and understand in order to bind ourselves to them. Making a journey through an uncertain landscape or terrain therefore means experiencing the *straniamento* (uncanny) Niccolò Scaffai (2017: 12 and chap. 1) speaks of, the ability to look at what surrounds us, and to which we are accustomed, from a new perspective, inverted or with different eyes; it therefore means dislocating, decentralizing our gaze from the human to the non-human, concentrating and privileging even marginal forms of life, in order to «think like a mountain» (Iovino 2015) or «allow a river to write»³⁶. In this sense, the four-part subdivision of the thirty-one stories refers to the changes taking place as a result of the evolution of the sedimentary space and considers the Anthropocene as a crucial historical moment that is witnessing the disappearance of some species, the artificial introduction of others and the interweaving of lives belonging to different geological strata.

Duperrex's journeys into uncertain terrain therefore begin with *Spectres*, those living things that represent the disappearance of the modern world, ghosts that evoke the ideas of loss, death, and extinction. For example, the *Taxodium distichum*³⁷, bald cypress trees of America that are sinking into the sinkhole caused by the collapse of a salt deposit operated by the Texas Brine petrochemical company in Bayou Corne, Louisiana, on August 2, 2012. The video that can be watched on the web is quite shocking (Boudreaux 2013).

The second section of Duperrex's travels focuses on *Résidents*, those newly-arrived living things, often hybrids such as the rocky aggregates of anthropogenic materials accumulated in river deltas. As on that of the Rhône, where human activities have favored the settlement of new species at the expense of local ones. In this regard, Duperrex defines the Camargue «a human invention [whose] wild beauty is a founding myth» (*VSI*, 77)³⁸. It is in fact a human made agro-industrial delta, «a balance between Pechiney's salt monopoly and

36 See the Loire Parliament project mentioned above.

37 «Les chassés du paradis – *Taxodium distichum*» (*VSI*, 43-45).

38 «Une invention humaine [dont] la beauté sauvage est un mythe de fondation».

the farmers' unions and groups» (*VSI*, 77)³⁹, a hybrid land, an artificial agglomeration symbolized by the heron and the wild boar — the *Bubulcus ibis* and the *Sus scrofa*, protagonists of the short stories “Un western agro-industriel” (*VSI*, 77-79) and “La tribu des hauts-fourneaux” (*VSI*, 111-114) respectively. For the former, the establishment of rice cultivation has created an attractive habitat; the latter, on the other hand, thrives artificially only thanks to the hunters who have nurtured it. Even the pink flamingo itself, a major tourist attraction in that region, is an indicator that the local «natural» heritage is actually «artificial». In fact, what saved the flamingos is precisely and paradoxically tourism: since these birds attract crowds of visitors to Camargue every year, an artificial island was created in the lagoon to facilitate their nesting.

The third part of Duperrex's travels is set under the sign of the *Sentinelles*, invisible beings and at the same time heralds and revealers of future crises caused by human damage to the natural environment. The cicada — the *Lyristes plebejus* protagonist of the story “Un paysage d'effroi” (*VSI*, 150-153) — is the animal that symbolizes the invisibility of attacks on living beings. Its powerful song betrays its presence, but it remains invisible to the eyes. It thus becomes a non-silent witness to what is happening in Cassis Bay where tons of toxic residues from the manufacture of aluminum have been buried for fifty years, all in the apparent preservation of the surrounding environment that must remain «natural and wild» (*VSI*, 150)⁴⁰ for the numerous tourists who visit it: «What the sublime landscape suffocates, but the cicadas sing, is the red scare of our attachments» (*VSI*, 153)⁴¹.

The cicadas therefore act as *sentinels* that urge us to awake from our torpor by drawing our attention to the dangers and damage that human beings cause.

The *Voyants* section closes the collection; it is shorter than the others because it consists of only four stories, four like the four elements of traditional cosmogony: water, fire, air, and earth. The living protagonists of this final part⁴² are *seers* because they reveal to humans, through their rituals, the forces at work in those places, offering insights to those territories of the South that simultaneously celebrate their landscapes. In this context, the eel becomes for Duperrex the «totem» animal of the book, both because it possesses «the science of surface sedimentary layers and the science of deep trenches» (*VSI*, 165)⁴³, and

39 «Un équilibre entre le monopole salinier de Pechiney et les syndicats et groupements agricoles».

40 «Naturel et sauvage».

41 «Ce que le paysage sublime étouffe, mais que les cigales chantent, c'est l'effroi rouge de nos attachements».

42 Here are the titles of the four stories from which the element the author has paired it with can be inferred: “*Magnolia grandiflora*, ou le rituel de l'eau”; “*Anguilla anguilla*, ou le rituel du feu”; “*Aedes aegypti*, ou le rituel de l'air”; “*Phragmites australis*, ou le rituel de la terre”.

43 «La science des couches sédimentaires de surface et la science des fossés profonds».

above all because it is the only one capable of uniting the Rhône with the Mississippi, of joining and connecting these two territories of the South.

Conclusion: The Omniscient Clairvoyant Eel

Anguilla rostrata, the American eel, swims down the Mississippi, leaving the marshes of the delta to breed in the Sargasso Sea. *Anguilla anguilla* is not very different from its American cousin. [...] It travels down the Rhône, leaves the delta marshes and goes to breed in the Sargasso Sea. (*VSI*, 165)⁴⁴

The reproductive cycle of this migratory animal remains shrouded in mystery and is incredibly complex. What is known is that all eels are born in the Sargasso Sea, the place in which the species reproduces itself. Due to this characteristic, within the narrative framework of Duperrex's book, the eel becomes the link between the two rivers, between the two deltas under investigation, but also between the two southern regions of the continents. It is no coincidence that the author assigns this animal a pivotal role, transforming it into a sort of priestess of the sediments, an omniscient narrator. Thanks to its journeys from the Sargasso Sea to the Mediterranean, it is the only living being capable of comparing, describing, and denouncing the human misdeeds in the Mississippi and Rhône deltas.

The eels of the two deltas meet at depth. Before giving birth to their offspring and before dying, they give each other news about their respective petrochemical landscapes. ExxonMobil, Texaco, Shell, BP, Valero, Chevron, for one. Total, Lyondell, Naphtachimie, Arkema, Geogaz, Esso for the other. (*VSI*, 165)⁴⁵

Due to its profound knowledge of both freshwater and saltwater territories, the eel becomes the ideal narrator for a book dedicated to the investigation of sedimentary worlds. This book addresses the contemporary need to find new ways of storytelling that express today's uncertainty and precariousness. It can be read not only as a practice of knowledge and denunciation but also as a preservation of memory and a celebration of worlds on the verge of extinction.

In line with the «sensory animism» described by David Abram (1997), Duperrex, with his *Voyages*, reaffirms the need to go beyond the apparent

44 «*Anguilla rostrata*, l'anguille d'Amérique, descend le Mississippi, quitte les marais du delta et va se reproduire en mer des Sargasses. *Anguilla anguilla* n'est guère différente de sa cousine américaine. [...] Elle descend le Rhône, quitte les marais du delta et va se reproduire en mer des Sargasses».

45 «Les anguilles des deux deltas se rencontrent donc en profondeur. Avant de donner naissance à leur descendance et avant de mourir, elles se donnent des nouvelles sur leurs paysages pétrochimiques respectifs. ExxonMobil, Texaco, Shell, BP, Valero, Chevron, pour l'une. Total, Lyondell, Naphtachimie, Arkema, Geogaz, Esso pour l'autre».

silence of the Earth, emphasizing the interconnection between all living beings. By giving voice to sediments and underscoring their importance — «black matter lives» — he transcends the idea of multispecies dialogue. He suggests, in line with Abram and with Anna Tsing (2015; 2022)⁴⁶, the sensory presence of everything, from plants to animals, rocks, and rivers, and the human ability to tune into these presences through greater awareness, attention, and listening skills. *Voyages en sol incertain* is thus a polyphonic work in which the author expresses his experience by giving voice to other living beings, making the human one of the many voices of Gaia. In this sense, the adopted perspective rejects both «catastrophic prophecy [and] confident opportunism» (Duperrex and Dutrait: 2013)⁴⁷ — two narratives that place the human viewpoint in the same position: that of not having a world from which to speak and act decisively. *Voyages en sol incertain*, on the other hand, advocates for the necessity of «non-simplistic counter-narratives»⁴⁸, as Duperrex mentioned in a 2013 interview with the newspaper *Libération* (*ibidem*). These are stories rooted in local histories and cultures that describe and aspire to a «habitable» world — a world that does not force all living beings to conform to the same language, values, and rules of calculation and play (*ibidem*). This is why, in my opinion, the book and Duperrex's broader work can be considered part of the resistance stories discussed by Serenella Iovino (2022) and Marco Armiero — efforts that attempt to contribute to dismantling the logic of the era of waste — the *Wasteocene* (Armiero 2021) —, in which we find ourselves living, with varying degrees of responsibility.

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46 Indeed, it seems that sediments function for Duperrex much like the mushroom does for Tsing. They become the emblem of the ability to survive, resist, and be reborn from the ruins of capitalism.

47 «La prophétie catastrophiste [et] l'opportunisme confiant».

48 «Contre-récits non simplistes».

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