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Marlene Creates: Land, Nature, and the Forest as Poetry/Museum

Abstract: In this article, I intend to scrutinize a Web project by the Canadian poet, land artist, and photographer Marlene Creates: *A Virtual Walk of The Boreal Poetry Garden* (2010). Her multimedia and multisensory artwork is here viewed as a contribution to the environmental humanities as well as to the eco-digital humanities. Creates's literary and photographic creations – that unravel through a patch of boreal forest in Newfoundland – are certainly among the most original and composite experiments in both digital art and *art-en-plain-air*, challenging the traditional museum and revealing nature within an ethical and aesthetic discourse of high literary value. The aim of this article is ultimately to assess the variety of media, forms, languages, and stances that The Boreal Poetry Garden project displays to its both real and virtual audiences, also taking into consideration the existing corpus of art and literary criticism on the artist's career (Susan Gibson Garvey and Andrea Kunard).

Keywords: Canadian literature, digital poetry, ecocriticism, ecopoetry, environmental humanities, humanities, land art, photography

Marlene Creates is a Canadian environmental artist, photographer, and poet. All these three artistic talents characterize the Web project discussed here. In 2010, she produced an original and multimodal artistic Web project entitled *A Virtual Walk of The Boreal Poetry Garden* (Creates 2017b).¹ The project is also to be enjoyed as an experience of eco-literary tourism, for it also involves a guided walking tours through a portion of the forest of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, in the vicinity of Creates's house. These various forms her poetry recitals; photography and film recordings; and interventions by natural scientists, acoustic musicians, and other multidisciplinary artists. In sum, it is a composite experiment in literary eco-art, digital humanities, and visual geography.² In order to better understand the intermedial nature of this total artwork, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, I will start by singling out each term in the project's title. The title deserves to be unravelled

¹ In the words of the British author Robert Macfarlane (2017, 106), Marlene Creates's work is "multi-perspectival."

² Schwartz (2017, 71).

first, so as to bring to the fore its own and the project's multifaceted implications and reverberations.

Then, I shall argue that it is important to define better the ethical and aesthetic imbrications in Marlene Creates's artistic and literary Web project – what Susan Gibson Garvey calls “Creates's aesthetic ‘ecology’” (2017, 16).³ So far, Marlene Creates's work has been studied mainly by fellow artists, art critics, and art curators, as the numerous reviews of her exhibitions, interviews, and volumes published on her works and career demonstrate. Lately, a new publication has assessed Marlene Creates's poetics, her engagement, and her ethical stance: *Marlene Creates: Places, Paths, and Pauses: A Retrospective*, edited by Susan Gibson Garvey and Andrea Kunard (2017). Most, but not all, of the essays in it are by art experts, and they will inform the present analysis. However, this essay tries to shed light on the high literary quality of Creates's Web project, as well as to study the connections between environmental humanities and eco-digital humanities, and the way in which they combine with each other, creating what in my opinion results in a new conception of the museum.

1 “Virtual”

With the term “virtual” – one could also refer to the “digital” – environment, we are immediately immersed in the World Wide Web, for Creates's art project can be enjoyed, watched, listened to, and navigated with a computer and a Web connection. Her project consists of presenting a complex model/system that shows how the digital world promotes a new alphabet, made of various media that cooperate and intermingle so as to produce a completely new grammar. This section is meant to demonstrate how multimodality takes effect through the analysis of poems that guide the participant audience and the digital navigators through the landscape that the poems, in conjunction with the use of photos and films, are able to engender.

The virtuality of the project is evident from its prologue, so to speak, for it opens with an aerial view of Portugal Cove on Newfoundland's Conception Bay (47.5734° N, 52.8583° W). The photo is a typical reproduction of geo-localization images that are globally familiar, thanks to applications such as *Google Maps* and Google satellite views.⁴ This opening image allows an immediate connection

³ Garvey (2017, 16).

⁴ See the first full-screen image of Marlene Creates's Web project, <http://marlenecreates.ca/virtualwalk/> (5 January 2018). This aerial photograph was taken by the Department of Environ-

between a local project, based on specific sites in the coastal area of one of the Atlantic provinces, and the global spectator's cognitive and technical capacities to comprehend maps and their land(scapes).⁵ It is thanks to the Web that the local becomes global and people from all over the world can easily access, know, and enjoy Marlene Creates's work/walk.

From that first image, the project becomes interactive and the digital spectator, who is connected through the Internet, a wanderer in a virtual space, is invited to click on the aerial photograph, on the computer screen, so as to begin the exploration of the territory and, along with it, of the particular digitalized and dematerialized hypertext that accompanies it. The cognitive skills of the viewer are triggered by the movement of the hands on the computer keyboard, mouse, or touchscreen, and the apprehension of information from the computer's screen and speakers by the eyes (the visual) and the ears (the auditory) respectively.

The next step/click brings the digital viewer to the "Introduction," which is a speech of one minute and thirty seconds that the artist delivers in front of a camera. Therein she offers the digital spectator instructions on how to proceed further and highlights some aspects of her poetics. First of all, she labels her own poems as "site-specific," that is, the poems she is going to read refer to a precise spot of land where they were first conceived. Second, she stresses how the poems bear traces of the local vernacular that, in the poet's words, "fulfils beautiful sonic relationships with this landscape." Third, the artist explains that she "tried to integrate her life and her art in these six acres of boreal forest," which resulted in "the slightness of her artistic gesture." Finally, she concludes that "often words are the only means to convey the fleeting phenomena that my camera cannot capture." What follows is an invitation to join the artist on a virtual walk through her natural sanctuary.

And from that moment, the artist will speak less to the camera – with close-ups of her face, while speaking – and more to address the real audience of noisy friends, visitors, and tourists who follow her through the forest, sometimes even at night with flashlights – while the camera is filming everything at a distance. Elsewhere, the digital spectator is completely immersed in the same event, bridging the temporal gap that separates the moment of its filming and his/her own experience of it. This is a very meaningful aspect of the project, as will become apparent.

According to the Italian psychoanalyst Vittorio Lingiardi, poetry, in particular, sparks a reverberation (*retentissement*) and activates our neurons in specific and

ment & Conservation, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, prior to high res satellite views of Portugal Cove being available.

5 "Part of my goal is to raise the appreciation of the boreal forest in Newfoundland. We're so focused on the sea and the coastline (naturally, I totally understand that) but it seems to me that the boreal forest we live in is also very special" (Crocker 2017).

complex ways (2017, 179) thanks to its brevity, rhythm, rhyme, distilled imagery, and intersubjective comprehension.⁶ Moreover, Lingiardi adds, a landscape, too, might reverberate in the same way. The effect is even more pronounced when encountering landscape poetry. All in all, then, experiencing Creates's photo-poems digitally does not necessarily involve a diminished experience of nature. Moreover, literature and the specific literary quality of the artist's experiment are worth analysing, for the literary and vocal poetic texts included in this art project are, in fact, dematerialized as part of the virtual ambience in which they are contextualized. This visual poetry constitutes an exemplary experiment in digital humanities, bringing poetry, an emblem of humanist literary tradition, right into the digital world, passing through the real, material world of nature.

To illustrate this point, two examples should suffice. Creates also situates some of her poems within the tradition of the haiku, which owes its popularity in Western modernist literature to Ezra Pound's translations (Pound 1993). Below are two of Creates's most effective image-poems:⁷

Will I
trim off this branch
jutting in the new path?
The next pass a yellow leaf brushes
my lips.

Pink wild
rose petals poised
downstream on the mossy
edge for two days; then a record
rainstorm.

These two brief poems, or haikus (Bradbury 2011), are very similar, not only on a surface level.⁸ Their inner cohesive structure generates formal similarities. Lines seem to tumble down, as if from a staircase, or as if from a waterfall, through assonance (e. g. the prominence of the *i* sound in the first poem, or of the voiced *s* sound in the second one – “rose,” “petals,” “poised,” “mossy,” “days”), alliteration (e. g. “pink,” “petals,” “poised”), false rhymes (e. g. “branch,” “path”), and imperfect rhymes (e. g. “wild,” “poised”).

⁶ Lingiardi distinguishes between reverberation and resonance; resonance has to do with dispersal over a surface, whereas reverberation has to do with depth (2017, 177).

⁷ All the poems cited and commented upon here are published in Concilio (2012, 65–82).

⁸ “Many of the short poems are in the cinquain form (with the syllable count being 2, 4, 6, 8, 2), which is my favourite form” (Creates, private correspondence, quoted in Concilio [2012, 66]).

Both poems slip through a temporal shift, a fault line creating a “before/after” divide, a gap or ellipse. The first poem is composed of question and answer. In the first part, the question regards a branch that has grown too much and might need pruning. In the second part, the answer, only implicit, negates what was only a rhetorical question. The single yellow leaf, with its sudden turn of colour, is too beautiful to be trimmed off. The second poem similarly focuses on colour: first, the pink petals of a wild rose are scattered on the mossy edge of the river, then, suddenly, there comes a heavy rainstorm. It is left to our imagination to picture how the petals are most probably washed away to disappear in the end.

Both these poems pivot around the aesthetic beauty of a shot of colour in the wilderness, an almost miraculous event that occurs abruptly and does not last long at the latitude where the poem was conceived. The poems indeed “occur” as epiphanies do; they are thought of as instantaneous illuminations stemming from nature. Yet this analysis is also indebted to the filming techniques that accompany the artist’s oral performance of the poems: cropping and montage. The films manage to portray the passing of time, for their images, thanks to montage, frame first a green branch, then a branch with a yellow leaf; first two pink wild roses, then their scattered petals on the water. Finally, the poems not only perfectly represent the natural materiality they sing; they also fit in perfectly with the filming techniques they accompany. In this sense, the two media, words and images, are absolutely complementary, as Creates stated at the very beginning of her presentation. They follow the same timing, cropping time, in fact, and juxtaposing straight away what happened “before” and what happened “after.” The trimming of the branch and the rainstorm, however, are only evoked in words, as threats that might erase the beauty of nature, which is captured in words/images.

What we digital spectators see is a very specific, local, natural event, typical of the boreal latitude, of that region, that season, respectively early autumn or summer. However, our knowledge and experience of the cyclical patterns of nature makes this word-image familiar. Our mirror neurons are responsible for our capacity as viewers to feel empathy towards what we are watching, be we close to or far away from the geography in question.

Nature is alive in word-image form, also because of the sounds it produces, and which audio-visual filming is able to capture: leaves rustling in the wind, water gurgling in the stream. These video-poems, or photo-poems, really involve all our senses, and it is not difficult to imagine the chill of that water and the pungent air of the forest. We, digital viewers, cannot but plunge into that multi-sensory experience, even if only through a screen, no matter where we are located.

One more of these poems is among the most effective haikus included in the art project, and it is worth analysing: “One apple.”

The storm
 began with one
 apple remaining on the tree;
 a chickadee gripped a twig in
 the gusts.

In this case, still images alternate with film sequences portraying a single red apple on the white frozen branches of a tree, all covered in snow. The bird mentioned in the last two lines is not visible, but its melodious and shrill call is audible thanks to the superimposition of an audio soundtrack. The effects of the storm that are visibly conveyed through the white rimy trees and branches are rendered in words, too: “the storm” and “the gusts” that, circularly and symmetrically, open and close the poem mimetically mirror the kind of enveloping or sealing created by ice.

In this extremely cold weather, one apple and one bird are singled out as tokens left behind by a precocious autumn storm, almost miraculously surviving in such conditions. The still image of the red apple on the white frosty branches could, perhaps, be compared to a still-life painting. Yet here, nature is alive, even when it is dead or dying, namely, photographically and photogenically frozen, for its cycles are exactly what characterizes its life, its *bios*. And all this increases our sense of how nature is an open-air museum, by which I mean the way in which it deserves periodic tours and visits in order to appreciate its never-ending exhibits. These photo-poems, or video-poems – depending on whether they are moving images or still shots – only grasp the momentary, rather than the eternal. Their *poiesis* is a miraculous, albeit precarious act of creation.

The poems also have a pedagogic function. They teach and educate both the local visitors and the remote viewer to look carefully, to stop and enjoy details, to appreciate colours as sudden revelations, to train their eyes to see the microscopic level rather than the macroscopic one, and to attune their ears to the sounds, noises, and music of nature. In short, the brief poems, in particular, are characterized by multimodality as follows:

Technology:	photo-poems (still/frozen images) video-poems (film, moving images) Web-poems (audio-visual)
Haiku technique:	image-poems/ambience-poems eco-poems
Poetic agency:	map-poems (walking) site-specific poems (landmarks) performance poems (oral recitation)

This is the new grammar of the digital hypertext that this Web project activates, made up of a digital environment overlapping with a natural environment, hosting poetry recitals and photography and films; in sum, it is an exemplary model of eco-digital humanities (on which see Cohen and Le Menager 2016).

2 “Walk”

The second element of the project’s title refers to walking. On her official website, Creates links to two more websites that contain archives of artistic projects which include poetry performances and walking in nature. One example is the symposium and creative gathering “Language, Landscape & the Sublime” (29 December 2017),⁹ a symposium organized by art.earth at Dartington Hall (UK) in 2016 that also included a screening of Marlene Creates’s documentary video-poem; “From the Ground Tier to a Sparrow Batch: A Newfoundland Treasury of Terms for Ice and Snow, Blast Hole Pond River, Winter 2012–2013”; a second example is “Walking Women,”¹⁰ a series of events organized by the Live Art Development Agency held in London (UK) in 2016 that saw women artists as protagonists of walking experiences and a variety of artistic practices. Thus, Creates’s artistic goals become clearer. On the one hand, her art deals with gender issues, or, better, the role of women artists, herself included, in our contemporary society. On the other hand, it deals with environmental issues; that is, her walk occurs in nature, in the land to produce eco-art.¹¹ For Creates, the latter becomes a way to articulate aesthetic creativity and ethical engagement with her beloved Newfoundland.

In Marlene Creates’s own Web project, the landscape becomes a walkscape. It becomes a landscape that takes shape while walking, while being crossed and poeticized, through performance poetry, and thanks to one’s moving body.¹² This is a walked cartography where the landscape has been shaped and humanized by hands and feet. “Walking the landscape is the performative aspect of nomadic thinking that allows us to enjoy [aesthetically and philosophically] the paths of action-words” (Careri 2006, 2; my translation; see also Lingardi 2017, 48).

⁹ <http://languagelandscapes.info/marlene-creates/> (11 March 2019).

¹⁰ <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/whats-on/walking-women/> (5 January 2018).

¹¹ “Underlying all my work has been an interest in place – not as a geographical location but as a process that involves memory, multiple narratives, ecology, language, and both scientific and vernacular knowledge” (Creates 2017a, 13).

¹² “Her intimate landworks, such as *Sleeping Places, Newfoundland 1982*, have more in common with aspects of feminist earth/body practices” (Garvey 2017, 16).

Walking has undergone a revival as both a philosophical and a life practice, but also as an artistic practice, perhaps thanks to new environmental awareness.¹³ Walking in the countryside and in nature (as a legacy of Romantic wandering) as well as urban walking (as a legacy of both *flânerie* and situational *derive*, or psychogeography) is a renewed critical and theoretical ground for literary and cultural, ethical, and aesthetic practices: according to Rebecca Solnit, these practices can be called “ecological.” She writes: “one new realm of walking opened up in the 1960s, walking as art” (Solnit 2014, 267).

The Walking Institute, as one more instance, based in Huntley, a small town in the north-east of Scotland, promotes socially engaged artistic projects that connect walking artists, communities, and places. The activities in which the artists of this community are involved include walking and reciting poetry while immersing oneself in nature, as, for instance, in the poet Petra Vergunst’s promenade performance of her poem “Embrace” in the Cruickshank Botanical Gardens,¹⁴ or, as another example, walking in groups, listening and recording in the woodland together with environmental artists Reiko Goto and Tim Collins as guides.¹⁵ These art projects are very similar to Creates’s own artistic experiments in Canada. Other works still, such as those by Hamish Fulton, could also be mentioned. He is a British walking artist who produces combinations of texts and photographs or illustrations, or vinyl wall texts, to be exhibited in galleries. His ethical principles include leaving no traces behind and leaving the landscape untouched. He also organizes group walks and social walks. For Fulton, walks need to be done very slowly and in silence to gain a meditative quality of concentration, in spite of the awareness of being among others, in order to purify oneself from the congestion of megadata bombarding one’s life through the Internet on a daily basis.¹⁶

In the contexts mentioned so far, walking means to pace and measure the land with a specific rhythm, it means allowing oneself to slow down, eventually to stop; to breathe air and its smells, eventually to touch the natural elements of one’s surroundings; it involves looking ahead and around, admiring and absorbing the landscape as a whole or in its smallest details by activating all sensory capacities. It is a physical activity, a cognitive and synaesthetic activity, as well as a philosoph-

¹³ In Italy, *Origami*, the weekly magazine of *La Stampa*, dedicated issue 71 to walking: *A ciascuno il suo cammino* (23–29 March 2017). See also *Walkopedia* (<https://www.walkopedia.net/>).

¹⁴ Vergunst (2017).

¹⁵ “Join environmental artists Reiko Goto and Tim Collins to explore issues of empathy, memory and imagination through walking, listening and recording in the woodlands north of Peterculter” (Vergunst 2016).

¹⁶ Hamish Fulton’s official website is <http://www.hamish-fulton.com>. (28 January 2018).

ical activity. Within the boundaries of the artistic projects here discussed, walking is for the participants also an ethical activity and an aesthetic praxis.

For Creates, in the specific Web project examined here, walking as art has become walking and then stopping to recite poetry in/about precise spots in the forest and specific, recognizable sites. This is also a way of singing the land, and it reminds us of the Australian Aborigines' singing of places and routes, by means of chanting the names of milestones, landmarks, water wells, distances, and directions. Not dissimilarly, the Apache use language "not only to navigate but also to charm the land – to sing it back into being, and to sing one's being back into it" (Macfarlane 2017, 105). Marlene Creates, while walking, chants specific features of her forest, for instance the landmark "rockface" that digital spectators can look at on the computer screen. This short poem dedicated to the "rockface" is worth analysing, for it shows walking as art and poetry as action-word, that is, a literary discourse that has a performative quality to the point of conjuring up before our eyes shapes that we can perfectly visualize:

Coming upon the rockface
for the first time – it is
something unto itself,
eerie, numinous.

In this case, nature is anthropomorphized, yet it remains itself. The rockface is a landmark, both recognizable and revisitable after that first epiphanic moment when the poet spotted it. Poetry allows the spectacle of nature to emerge as that which is ultimately worth seeing and experiencing as given unto itself. In this way, when we follow the poet who walks, tells, maps the boreal forest, that forest also becomes a community space for us all, both real and digital walkers, a shared place, not the privileged Romantic site for the poet alone to contemplate or whose emotion can be felt at a later time, as it was in Wordsworth's case when he wrote of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (1973, 608). The forest is easily transformed into our own mindscape as well:

The events in The Boreal Poetry Garden have evolved into multi-sensorial crossings, between the arts and sciences. They have included collaborations with nature poets, boreal ecologists, geologists, wildlife and bird biologists, acoustic musicians, and contemporary dancers – all helping to connect people to the boreal forest ecosystem. And there are ripple effects from the participants encountering each other. (Creates 2017a, 160)

As Web-viewer spectators, we do not know where exactly the real audience is going and in what direction; however, the surprise effect creates curiosity and expectations to the point that visualizing the landmark of the rockface becomes

almost an act of re-cognition – for us, too, as we watch it through the screen. Rocks have “animacy”; “a rock is within its properly geologic duration a wayfarer, a holder of stories of mountains that undulate and continents that journey to the sea” (Cohen 2014, ix). The rockface is just such a living element; its story is here translated into/by the poem according to the terms of material ecocriticism: “all matter is a ‘storied matter’” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1). Moreover, “minerals offer poetry and art that humans only sometimes grasp,” and “stone becomes an ecological agent with an inscribed and inhuman story” (Cohen 2016, 341). Moreover, the poet/artist shows how natural elements are not singled out hierarchically, for the vegetal and the mineral, biology and geology, are all worth poeticizing and photographing.

Another example of the high and varied quality of the literary achievements of the poet/artist is an extremely suggestive and moving example of a stand-alone documentary video-poem: “River of Rain.” Part of *A Virtual Walk of The Boreal Poetry Garden*, it consists of a seven-minute film in which the soundtrack is produced by the juxtaposition of the noisy stream of water, flowing and rattling, with the poet’s murmuring voice, singing the river lyrically.

If Creates’s work disproves Michael Ondaatje’s assumption about the relation between Canada and the haiku when he claims: “Canada supposedly sparked the idea for Imagism but it is really not the country for the haiku,” it proves him right when he assesses that “long poems crawl out of cupboards, archives, gardens, long bus journeys, out of every segment of Canadian writing” (1979, 11). Creates’s more narrative poem, almost a long poem that follows in the footsteps of the “typical” North American and Canadian tradition,¹⁷ mimics the irregular course of the river from its source to the ocean. It narrates the river’s geological history, the water’s cycle, from liquid to vapour and rain, the relationship of the river to the ocean, the morphology of the terrain that causes the river to widen into a bog, and the specificity of that ecosystem, including the local fauna (trout) and the varied flora. As the poem is being recited, our gaze may wander downstream and caress those turbulent waters, those rocks, those weeds exactly as the camera does. Sometimes, the poet’s voice stops, as if she needed to take a deep breath or ponder, and subtitles appear in parentheses – these are her mute thoughts and memories:

(Again, I am drawn
to this waterfall.)

¹⁷ “The long poem has been read as a lyric, as an epic, as a discursive narrative, as a postmodern text. [...] it engages itself with disparate elements only to subvert their functions and ideologies” (Kambourelli 1991, xiii–xiv).

Her thoughts and memories take the digital visitors to the same locations – in this case, the same waterfall, mesmerized as we are by the sound of tumbling water like a refreshing breeze. Then, the poem moves uphill from where water reels down upon rocks that were once lava, that welled up under an ocean “hundreds of millions of years ago.”

(Not under the Atlantic,
not even the
previous Iapetus
but,
a geologist told me,
an earlier
pan-African ocean.)

The poet's mute thinking thus introduces the astonishing geological history of Newfoundland. Most of eastern Canada, around the Hudson Bay (Kangiqsualuk ilua), is characterized by the so-called Canadian Shield, or Laurentian Plateau, a formation of Precambrian igneous and very hard metamorphic rocks deriving from the ancient magmatic activity in the area. At present, this land is covered only by a very thin layer of soil that makes the terrain very hard to cultivate. Labrador occupies the eastern tip of the Shield. However, the the Avalon Peninsula in the south-east of the island of Newfoundland, where the capital city, St. John's is, there used to be a microcontinent (Avalonia), in the Palaeozoic era, where some of the oldest rocks and fossils in the world are still to be found. These come straight from the northern volcanic arc of Gondwana. On the west coast of Newfoundland, furthermore, the Tablelands in Gros Morne National Park show the effects of plate tectonics, for rocks from the deep ocean crust and the Earth's mantle lie exposed instead of being buried at great depths, as is usually the case.

The poem, therefore, explores the geology of the place, but in a lyric, suggestive, and moving way, like an ongoing caress. From those rocks the river reels down, from “droplets melding into runnels,” and its waters swell into the Blast Hole Pond, locally known by some as Blassy Pond, a sanctuary for trout.

(Some called it Blassy Pond.
“We went in trouting
and we said we went
in Blassy Pond.
You know what blasty boughs are?
We said blassy.”)

Here, the poem harks back to the Newfoundland vernacular, for “blasty” is said “of the branch(es) of a spruce or fir, dead and dry but with the needles, now red

or brown, still adhering,” and the combination “blasty bough” or “blassy bough” means “such a branch which, used as kindling, burns with a quick, fierce, crackling flame.”¹⁸

The poem entwines a particular ecosystem with its language so much that, should that environment be irremediably damaged, the language that describes it, maps it, names it, makes it visible to the human eye and perceptible to the human senses would disappear as well. Blassy Pond is therefore cherished as a dear old friend, no differently from the rockface.

This long documentary poem – which would deserve to be quoted at length, for its strength is precisely in its length – moves on, naming flora specimens one by one, matching knowledge of scientific notions and local lore. Before the river ends up in the ocean, the poem dissolves, too, into drops of words scattered randomly. These are keywords sounded to evoke the whole river course, tumbling one over the other, murmured, with the rattling waters as sonic background, till a final “Adieu” concludes this journey downriver as a delicate, lyrical homage to water and the creatures it begets.

Rocks, water, stars, sky and earth, humans, fish and trees, grass, lichen, and flowers – all are lined up like a ribbon along the river. They resonate like drops of dripping rain in our ears; in front of our eyes they materialize, thanks to the camera that moves under the rhythm of words lyrically disposed to create the neuroaesthetic effect of which Lingiardi speaks: “artistic production and fruition, due to the anatomy and physiology of visual mechanisms, particularly before a landscape” (Lingiardi 2017, 75; my translation).

Finally, this digital project is didactic too: it merges scientific information and poetry, what we believe and what we imagine, into a clear, lucid, and evocative ecological discourse-and-display. We end up believing not only what we see but also what we do not see, the museum-like experience of nature. This is a moment within Creates’s Web project where environmental humanities explicitly encounter the eco-digital humanities. Eco-digital humanities include art projects with a visually rich grammar; the use of the new media, like the Internet; the conjunction of art and science (Cohen 2016, 341).

Marlene Creates’s “work is preoccupied with nature-culture relations, but the form of these relations is characterized by messy entanglement rather than simple connection,” writes Macfarlane (2017, 101). Here, I would add, we are offered a spectacle of *natura naturans*, nature that flourishes, that is alive and produces its

¹⁸ Entry for “blasty” (<https://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary/index.php#381>) in the online *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (8 January 2018).

own show; and of *cultura naturans*,¹⁹ an artistic project, made of photos, videos, oral poetry performance, written text, short- and long-measure poems, that is born out of ecological cultural perspectives, and that produces a natural spectacle as well.

3 “Boreal”

We now come to the third term in the title of Creates’s project to be considered in this article. This section of the article will develop as a constant dialogue between Marlene Creates’s concern for the boreal forest and Robert Pogue Harrison’s theorization of the forest.

Following scientific data in her description of the boreal forest, Creates assesses it as the largest intact ecosystem left on Earth: one third of the world’s vegetation – science tells us – is boreal. It forms a swathe around the crown of the planet, covering 12 million square kilometres – about 3 million acres – across Canada, Alaska, Scandinavia, Russia, northern China, and Japan (Concilio 2012, 79–80). The boreal forest is mainly coniferous trees, particularly larch, spruce, and fir, as well as deciduous shrubs and trees like alders, willows, poplars, and birches; and there is a multitude of mosses, lichens, and wildflowers. Creates claims: “I have found over forty different kinds of wildflowers just in the little patch of boreal forest where I live” (quoted in Concilio 2012, 79; private correspondence). Water in many forms is also a major feature of the boreal forest: there are rivers, ponds, lakes, brooks, and bogs. Canada’s boreal forest stretches right across the country from the Yukon to Newfoundland and Labrador. It measures about 5 million square kilometres – about 1.4 billion acres. Thus, Canada has almost half the world’s boreal forest. It is home to hundreds of First Nations communities, as well as a habitat for wildlife, including the black bear, lynx, moose, wolf, caribou, and snowshoe hare, and over three hundred bird species.

Forests matter now. They are under scrutiny thanks to an increase in environmental awareness and due to the drastic effects of climate change. In his study *Forests* (1992), Robert Pogue Harrison writes:

The global problem of deforestation provokes unlikely reactions of concern these days among city dwellers, not only because of the enormity of the scale [...]. We call it the loss of nature, or the loss of wildlife habitat, or the loss of biodiversity, but underlying the ecolog-

¹⁹ In “a classic Creates essay, ‘Nature is a verb to me,’ she outlines the challenges to an ecologically sensitive art practice” (Garvey 2017, 15).

ical concern is perhaps a much deeper apprehension about the disappearance of boundaries, without which the human abode loses its grounding. Somewhere, we still sense that we make ourselves at home only in our estrangement, or in the *logos* of the finite. In the cultural memory of the West forests “correspond” to the exteriority of the *logos*. The outlaws, the heroes, the wanderers, the lovers, the saints, the persecuted, the outcasts, the bewildered, the ecstatic – these are among those who have sought out the forest’s asylum in the history we have followed throughout this book. Without such outside domains, there is no inside in which to dwell. (Harrison 1992, 247)

Among the outsiders who dwell in the forest we could count Marlene Creates, the poet, land artist, and photographer. It is thanks to her art that we, as digital travellers, experience the exterior world, as if through the window of our computer screen.

Even more dramatically, Harrison claims that “we do not merely ‘speak meaning’ to the world but ‘speak our death’ to the world. [...] Nature knows how to die, but human beings know mostly how to kill as a way of failing to become their ecology. [...] when we do not speak our death to the world we speak death to the world. And when we speak death to the world, the forest’s legend falls silent” (1992, 249). Harrison provides an apocalyptic vision of humans’ inability to produce an ecological discourse and praxis, and foresees the silencing of the forest. Marlene Creates, too, sees the forest as a fragile ecosystem. But she gives voice to it.

The voice of the boreal forest in Portugal Cove is what we learn to recognize in Creates’s art project. By showing the way both to the digital observer and to the real audience, the artist points to spots where she has witnessed something numinous that she has captured with her camera and with her poems, through a combination of words, images, and the recording of natural sounds.

As noted above, Harrison writes that forests have suddenly become a major focus of ecological activism around the world. Creates’s interest in the boreal forest involves exactly the kind of ecological activism that aims to learn a great deal about the ecology of forests: “attentive environmental and cultural consciousness” are attributes her critics recognize in Marlene Creates.²⁰ She wants to know, and she wants us all to come to know, the bit of forest around her house.²¹

Harrison, more precisely, writes: “We now know that forests are prodigious ecosystems: environments where various species establish their ‘niche’ and exist in complex, integrated relationships to one another, each contributing its share

²⁰ Graff and Dykhuis (2017, 9).

²¹ “There have been two major turns in both my work and my life in response to moves: from Ottawa to St. John’s in 1985, and to Blast Hole Pond Road in Portugal Cove in 2002. Since then, my principal artistic venture has been to pay close attention to one particular place – the six acres of boreal forest where I live” (Creates 2017a, 13).

to the network and each, in turn, depending on the delicate coherence of the network as a whole” (1992, 199). Creates is conscious of the anthropic impact on any environment, yet she indistinctly chants rocks, leaves, waters, trees, grass, moss, flowers, fruits, animals, clouds, anthropic presences – animate and inanimate natural elements that share the same bio-logic, avoiding hierarchies.

Harrison claims that it is “the empirical science of ecology” that “examines the mosaic of such systems and elaborates the biological conditions that sustain life within them” (1992, 199). Yet, in this specific project, Creates combines photographs and poems as complementary arts and media to carry out this same task.

Forests, Harrison maintains, “provide a paradigm for the notion of the earth as a single, complex, integrated ecosystem.” Moreover, they are also “metonymies for the earth as a whole” (Harrison 1992, 199). So, once again, here, the boreal forest, local as it is, becomes a metonym for a global concern. But for Creates, representing *her* forest in words and images also means rediscovering the local vernacular of Newfoundland. Salvaging a language together with the territory where it belongs, in spite of promoting a very local objective, becomes a more complex ecological effort and also proof of personal and artistic commitment.

If, in conclusion, Harrison is right in saying that “by emphasizing the degree to which we belong to the earth’s cosmic forest, ecologists tend to redefine humanity’s place of dwelling in global terms” (1992, 199), Creates shows us that dwelling by allowing us to take a virtual walk in her linguistic and forestal realm of art.²² Not unlike Harrison, and as remarked by Macfarlane (2017, 101), Creates’s poems associate the concept of dwelling with our original closeness to forests. This concept is underlined by Harrison and symbolized, in his opinion, by Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural masterpiece *Fallingwater*, where the house built on flat horizontal concrete slabs, mimicking the rocks of the waterfall it incorporates, as well as the horizon, which means freedom to the artist, is one thing with the forest that surrounds it (Harrison 1992, 233).

22 This form of dwelling seems to diverge from the Heideggerian notion of dwelling: “What, then, does *Bauen*, building, mean? The Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place. The real meaning of the verb *bauen*, namely, to dwell, has been lost to us. But a covert trace of it has been preserved in the German word *Nachbar*, neighbor. [...] Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen*, *baun*, *bhu*, *beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin*, *du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (Heidegger 1971, xiii; emphasis in the original).

From a different perspective, Robert Finley, however, goes further and asks more pointed questions about the turning of the forest into a poetry garden (*locus/logos*), addressing the links between ecology and language – precisely those that, as I have argued, distinguish Creates’s project from others more emphatically focused on explicit ecological issues. He asks:

Could we say that what gets “turned over” in *The Boreal Poetry Garden* is story, that what gets planted are poems, that the gardening done there gets done with words? That the ritual readings of the poems in situ and the remembered events which they subscribe make the wood a locus of social meaning (the Garden’s “harvest”), and both neighbours us to it and fixes it in memory as a discrete place? – We are gardenized, too. (Finley 2015, 170)

4 Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to add one more meaning to Creates’s work. Most importantly, what is at stake in her project, and what more than anything deserves to be stressed, is that *The Boreal Poetry Garden* also turns into a museum. This project completely subverts our idea of a traditional museum as a building, an enclosed place in the heart of urban environments, towards which artefacts and *oeuvres* of various origins, places, and times converge and in which they are exhibited. In the past, Marlene Creates has written that she is well aware of not being able to bring the whole of Newfoundland into a museum’s exhibition rooms. She is also aware that re-moving natural matter from its original place is an act of exploitation. This art project is not an example of traditional land art, where artefacts are added to the landscape and are visible as intrusive elements.

Thus, in her *Boreal Poetry Garden*, Creates demonstrates that nature is the museum, nature is the spectacle: it is an outdoor museum, and it is possible to walk around and admire, or to browse, if watched on a screen, the *objets d’art*/natural objects exactly as we do in traditional museums, as a similarly complete synaesthetic experience. In a traditional museum, however, be it a natural history museum or an art gallery, natural objects become inert, caged, and staged artificially for specific purposes that need captions and labels and archival indexing. In nature, the art objects, so to speak, are live and protean, metamorphic and ever-changing, even if it is only because of the wind blowing. The poems that Marlene Creates has authored for them have been printed and “planted” on the spots where they were originally conceived, as fragile, impermanent, and precarious captions and labels.

Creates’s artistic statement is more radical than she might have planned, for it puts nature on show and transforms it into a live, interactive digital/natural

museum. Thus, we are drawn to a faraway place to admire its aesthetic, ongoing, never-ending, and undisturbed spectacle. We become spectators of a virtual-natural museum. A museum where land is art, nature is art, forest is art: a sort of embodied poetry. The Web project becomes a portal with which “to share”²³ this experiment in eco-digital humanities.

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23 Garvey (2017, 21).

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