



NATURE, TERRITORY, AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY QUEBEC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Quebec literature increasingly foregrounds the environment not merely as a passive backdrop but as a dynamic element shaping identity, memory, culture, and political consciousness. This development coincides with the rise of ecocritical thought and growing awareness of ecological crises in the twenty-first century. Quebec writers, particularly those associated with Indigenous and regional narratives, depict landscapes, forests, rivers, and rural territories as spaces of cultural memory, resistance, and healing. Authors such as Naomi Fontaine, Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, Virginia Pésémapeo Bordeleau, and Jocelyne Saucier articulate environmental imaginaries that challenge anthropocentric narratives and reframe the relationship between humans and nature. In particular, Naomi Fontaine’s works, including *Kuessipan* and *Manikanetish*, present the Innu territory as a central component of cultural identity and collective survival. Through ecocritical analysis, this paper examines how contemporary Quebec literature represents the environment as (1) a cultural landscape, (2) a repository of memory and identity, (3) a site of resistance to colonial and industrial exploitation, and (4) a space for healing and collective renewal. By analyzing selected texts and literary trends, the study demonstrates that environmental representation in Quebec literature functions not only aesthetically but also politically and culturally, reflecting broader transformations in environmental humanities and Indigenous literary expression.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the environment has become a significant thematic and symbolic element in contemporary literature worldwide. Within the context of Quebec literature, environmental representation reflects historical, cultural, and political relationships between people and land. The province of Quebec possesses vast forests, rivers, and northern landscapes, which have long influenced its literary imagination. However, contemporary writers increasingly depict nature not merely as scenery but as an active participant in human life, identity, and historical consciousness.

The emergence of ecocriticism and environmental humanities has further shaped literary analysis of such texts. Literature plays a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness and fostering sustainable cultural perspectives, demonstrating how aesthetic forms can contribute to ecological reflection and social change (Löschnigg & Braunecker, 2019).

Within Quebec's literary landscape, authors often explore the tension between urban modernity and rural or Indigenous territories. These narratives question traditional ideas of nature as a passive resource and instead portray the environment as a living system interconnected with human culture. Scholars have described this shift as the emergence of an "environmental imagination" in Quebec literature, in which literary texts increasingly examine the relationship between human societies and ecological systems.

This transformation is particularly visible in the works of Indigenous writers such as Naomi Fontaine and Natasha anapé Fontaine, whose narratives situate environmental spaces at the center of cultural identity and resistance. Their writing illustrates how land and territory are inseparable from Indigenous memory and community survival.

Therefore, this paper explores how contemporary Quebec literature represents the environment and analyzes the multiple roles it plays in shaping narrative structures, cultural identity, and ecological consciousness.

2. Ecocritical Perspectives in Quebec Literature

Ecocriticism provides a theoretical framework for understanding environmental representation in literature. Emerging in the late twentieth century, ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the natural world, exploring how texts depict ecological relationships, environmental ethics, and human interactions with nature.

In the Quebec context, ecocritical scholarship highlights the transformation of nature writing into a broader literary engagement with environmental issues. Contemporary writers no longer

present nature merely as a romantic landscape but rather as a complex environment where human and non-human actors interact.

Moreover, recent literary works challenge traditional Western dichotomies between culture and nature. Instead of portraying nature as a domain to be conquered or exploited, many contemporary texts emphasize coexistence, ecological balance, and the interconnectedness of living beings.

This shift is particularly significant in Indigenous literature, where land is understood not simply as territory but as a living entity connected to ancestral traditions, spirituality, and collective memory. In such narratives, the environment becomes both a cultural and political symbol.

Thus, the environmental imagination in Quebec literature reflects broader intellectual movements such as ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and Indigenous literary resurgence.

2.1 Environment as Cultural Landscape

One of the most significant roles of the environment in contemporary Quebec literature is its function as a cultural landscape. Rather than serving as a neutral setting, landscapes often embody social histories, community values, and cultural identities.

In the works of Naomi Fontaine, the territory of the Innu people is portrayed as inseparable from cultural belonging. Fontaine's novel *Kuessipan* depicts life on the Innu reserve of Uashat, presenting both the physical environment and the emotional relationship between people and their land. The narrative portrays everyday life in the community while emphasizing the presence of surrounding forests, rivers, and northern landscapes.

In this context, the environment becomes a marker of Indigenous identity. The ancestral territory known as Nutshimit represents the interior lands where traditional ways of life—hunting, fishing, and spiritual practices—continue to shape the community's cultural memory. Nutshimit symbolizes not only geographic space but also a spiritual refuge and a source of identity for the Innu people. Similarly, other contemporary Quebec writers depict landscapes as culturally meaningful spaces. In Jocelyne Saucier's novel *Il pleuvait des oiseaux*, the remote forests of northern Quebec provide refuge for elderly characters seeking freedom from social constraints. The natural environment becomes a space where individuals can redefine their identities outside the structures of modern society.

Thus, landscapes in Quebec literature often function as cultural narratives that preserve memory, identity, and collective belonging.

2.2 Environment and Indigenous Identity

The representation of environment in Indigenous Quebec literature is deeply intertwined with issues of colonial history and cultural survival. For many Indigenous writers, the land is not merely a resource but a fundamental component of community identity.

Naomi Fontaine, a member of the Innu nation, writes from within this cultural perspective. Her works frequently explore themes of community, memory, and Indigenous resilience.

In Kuessipan, environmental spaces such as forests, rivers, and coastal landscapes reflect the historical relationship between the Innu people and their ancestral territory. The narrative contrasts traditional connections to land with the realities of life on modern reserves, where colonial policies have restricted Indigenous mobility and access to traditional hunting grounds.

Similarly, Indigenous poets like Natasha Kanapé Fontaine emphasize the sacred relationship between humans and nature. Her poetry often portrays rivers, animals, and forests as spiritual entities that communicate with human communities. Through such representations, the environment becomes a participant in cultural storytelling. Another important Indigenous writer, Virginia Pésémapeo Bordeleau, incorporates environmental symbolism into her literary and artistic works. Her narratives frequently depict animals, forests, and natural elements as spiritual guides, reflecting Cree cosmology and ecological knowledge.

These literary representations challenge Western notions of environmental ownership and instead emphasize reciprocity between humans and nature. Consequently, Indigenous Quebec literature contributes significantly to contemporary ecological thought.

2.3 Environment as a Site of Resistance

Another important role of the environment in contemporary Quebec literature is its function as a site of resistance against colonialism, industrialization, and environmental exploitation.

Historically, many Indigenous communities in Quebec have faced environmental displacement due to mining, hydroelectric projects, and industrial expansion. Contemporary literature often addresses these issues by portraying landscapes threatened by economic development.

For instance, several literary and artistic works critique the impact of urban expansion and industrialization on natural territories. Cultural productions highlighting urban sprawl emphasize how rapid development can lead to environmental degradation and the disappearance of traditional landscapes. In literary narratives, such environmental transformations often symbolize broader social conflicts. Writers depict forests being cleared, rivers being diverted, and communities being displaced, illustrating how ecological exploitation intersects with colonial

power structures.

Indigenous writers, in particular, use environmental narratives to resist colonial narratives that treat land as a commodity. Instead, they assert the cultural and spiritual significance of territory, emphasizing Indigenous sovereignty and ecological stewardship.

Thus, environmental representation in Quebec literature frequently serves as a political statement against exploitation and ecological injustice.

2.4 Environment as a Space of Healing

Beyond resistance and identity, the environment also plays a therapeutic role in contemporary Quebec literature. Natural landscapes often function as spaces where characters confront trauma, rediscover cultural roots, and achieve emotional healing. In Naomi Fontaine's writings, returning to ancestral territory often represents a process of cultural renewal. The forest and northern landscapes provide psychological refuge from the social problems experienced within reserve communities. This idea aligns with broader themes in Indigenous literature, where reconnection with land is viewed as essential for healing historical trauma caused by colonialism and cultural displacement. For example, in many narratives, characters seek solitude in natural environments such as forests, lakes, or remote territories. These landscapes enable reflection, self-discovery, and reconciliation with personal and collective histories. The environment thus becomes a symbolic space where the boundaries between past and present, human and non-human, individual and community are reimagined.

2.5 Environmental Ethics and Ecological Consciousness

Contemporary Quebec literature also contributes to broader discussions about ecological responsibility and environmental ethics.

As global ecological crises intensify, writers increasingly highlight the fragility of ecosystems and the consequences of environmental destruction. Through narrative and poetic representation, literature encourages readers to reconsider their relationship with nature.

Environmental narratives often emphasize interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. This perspective challenges anthropocentric attitudes that treat nature solely as a resource for human consumption. Furthermore, literary depictions of landscapes under threat can generate empathy and environmental awareness among readers. By presenting ecological issues through storytelling, literature becomes a powerful tool for environmental advocacy.

Therefore, contemporary Quebec literature not only reflects environmental concerns but also participates in shaping ecological consciousness.

3. Conclusion

The representation of the environment in contemporary Quebec literature reveals a profound transformation in the literary imagination. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop, the environment has become a dynamic narrative element that shapes identity, memory, resistance, and healing. Through the works of writers such as Naomi Fontaine, Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, Virginia Pésémapeo Bordeleau, and Jocelyne Saucier, Quebec literature redefines the relationship between humans and the natural world. These authors portray landscapes as cultural spaces, spiritual territories, and sites of ecological reflection.

Indigenous literature, in particular, highlights the deep connections between land and identity, emphasizing reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. At the same time, contemporary narratives address environmental challenges such as industrialization, urban expansion, and ecological degradation.

Ultimately, the environmental imagination in Quebec literature reflects broader intellectual and cultural transformations within the environmental humanities. By integrating ecological awareness with cultural storytelling, contemporary Quebec writers invite readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and to recognize the environment as a vital component of human existence.

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