

The Emergent Posthuman Landscape in Ying Chen's *La rive est loin*

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The last novel of what has been termed Ying Chen's "série fantôme," *La rive est loin* (2013), draws us further into a posthuman existence that has been consistently gestured towards since the publication of *Immobile* (1998) and concludes with a reconfiguration of space, place, and subjectivity that is inextricably intertwined with nature. This article proposes a metaphorical reading of the husband's brain tumor and the disintegration of the house inhabited by Chen's recurring couple as the gradual deconstruction of a monolithic human order in favor of a deeper eco-philosophical way of being in the world that is squarely aligned with Rosi Braidotti's theory of the posthuman.

Le dernier roman de ce que l'on désigne "la série fantôme" de Ying Chen, *La rive est loin* (2013), nous invite à explorer la possibilité d'une existence posthumaine qui est, en effet, présente chez Chen dès la publication d'*Immobile* (1998). *La rive est loin* se termine avec une totale reconfiguration de l'espace et du sujet en mode de vie inextricablement lié à la nature. Cet article propose une lecture métaphorique de la maladie du mari et de la chute de la maison du couple comme symboles de la déconstruction de la toute-puissante loi humaine. À la place de cette loi humaine, Chen substitue un moyen d'être éco-poétique qui s'aligne de près avec la théorie posthumaine de Rosi Braidotti.

As Rachel Bouvet and Stéphanie Posthumus (2016) note in their article on eco- and geo- criticism, the last decade has seen an insurgence of approaches to representations of space, place, landscape, and nature in French and francophone literary studies. These approaches, they argue, center on two particular critical "turns:" the spatial turn (which focuses on relationships with and experiences of place) and the ecological turn (which is concerned with planetary environmental issues and human responsibility). Bouvet and Posthumus describe this new wave of extreme contemporary eco-/geo- literature as presenting us with "stories, images and metaphors that will help us imagine the

future of the human species on planet earth” (2016, 408). Jason Moore observes in his introduction to *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*, that this future is increasingly turbulent, explosive, and uncertain (Moore 2016, 1), due to the nefarious effects of climate change, massive biodiversity loss, toxification, epidemic disease, and other biophysical issues (Moore 2016, 11). The fiction of Ying Chen is impregnated with such “stories, images and metaphors” that incite the reader to reflect on the relationship between human and environment at both a personal and global level. The representation of space and place in Chen’s fiction has already attracted the attention of literary scholars (for example, Dupuis 2011; Parker 2011; Rodgers 2011, 2015; Silvester 2011; Yang 2013), most notably because of the way that the author rigorously challenges our preconceived notions of these categories. She calls on the reader to adopt a vision of our physical environment that is permeable and fluctuating rather than fixed and bounded. Critics such as Rosalind Silvester (2011) have commented on the importance accorded by Chen to what one could term “non-spaces,” ranging from liminal spaces (shorelines and skies) to positions of extreme beyondness (the afterlife, the underworld). It is often argued that this predominance of the non-space in Chen reflects both the migrant condition of the writer and the constant sense of dislocation experienced by the recurring unnamed female protagonist. For Chen herself, however, as she proclaims in *Quatre mille marches*, her first collection of essays reflecting on her writing, the disintegration of space and place in her work and reluctance to situate her novels in a bounded environment is more to do with her own personal view of humanity as worlded and interconnected, “où les barrières géographiques, temporelles et linguistiques sont volontairement effacées” (2004, 91).

Chen and posthuman theory

It is Chen’s emphasis on inter-relationality that leads me to focus this analysis of *La rive est loin* on the emergence of a distinctly posthuman landscape. *La rive est loin* is the concluding novel of what Chen refers to as her “série de romans ténébreux sur le temps, l’espace et les instincts” (2014, 26) or, as Yang terms it the “série fantôme” (2013, 329). Commencing in 1998 with *Immobile*, this particular series of novels which also includes *Le champ dans la mer* (2002), *Querelle d’un*

squelette avec son double (2003), *Le mangeur* (2006), *Un enfant à ma porte* (2009) and *Espèces* (2010), is characterized by increasingly fluid frames of time and space as well as the recurrence of the central couple (that is, the unnamed female protagonist and her husband A.). Previously in the pages of *Québec Studies*, I argue that it is fruitful to interpret Chen's writing through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity (Rodgers 2015). Employing such a critical perspective helps the reader not only to make some sense of the fragmented identity of Chen's narrator but also to grasp the creative potential of chaotic subjectivity in that it promotes the self as an ongoing process of reinvention and endless possibility. This article will remain with Braidotti but with a new focus on her theory of the posthuman, a concept that takes root in the nomadic but which goes much further in its critique of species supremacy and its assertion of the importance of expanding our vision of both ourselves and the spaces we inhabit to include the non-human. In this article, I demonstrate how *La rive est loin* signifies the end of one system, that is, anthropocentrism, and replaces it with a new order or way of being that shares close links with the posthuman.

This turn towards the posthuman is not, however, an entirely new direction for Chen. For example, if we take the "becoming-animal" aspect of the posthuman condition, there is a progressive shift in the "série fantôme" away from the human state to the complete merging of animal and human as is the case in *Espèces* with the female protagonist's transformation into a cat. A similar shift applies to the author's treatment of time where human linearity gradually disintegrates throughout the course of the second series to the point that past, present, and future are no longer discernible or distinguishable from one another nor are the boundaries between life and death. In this respect, it is possible to argue that Chen has always been concerned with the "more-than-human" and "beyond-human" dimensions of our existence and has sought, through her writing, to hone a practice of entanglement where the accumulative interlocking of human and non-human promotes reflection that has the potential to disrupt anthropocentrism. Chen's novels, therefore, could be said to fall under the category of eco-critical fiction (which incorporates writing on the posthuman), that is, narratives whose principal "emanating point [...]"

is no longer the human self but the human-non-human complex of interrelated agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 9).

Braidotti and the posthuman

Braidotti is not unique, of course, in developing a philosophy of the posthuman. Earlier theorists of the posthuman whose work has undoubtedly influenced Braidotti’s arguments include Donna Haraway (1985), Katherine Hayles (1999), and Robert Pepperell (2003); more recent variations on theorizing the posthuman range from Patricia MacCormack’s *Posthuman Ethics* (2012) and Richard Grusin’s *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015) to Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology* (2016) and Bernard Stiegler’s *The Neganthropocene* (2018). However, it is Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013) that will predominantly inform my reading of the emergent posthuman landscape in *La rive est loin* for two key reasons: first, the advanced capitalist backdrop against which both Chen’s and Braidotti’s texts are set and, indeed, seek to comment on; and, secondly, Braidotti’s shared outlook with Chen, which embraces the eco-philosophical as part of a posthuman future or, more specifically, the adoption of an interrelated consciousness that can lead us to better inhabit our world.

Before analyzing the posthuman landscape as it emerges in *La rive est loin*, it is important to probe what it actually means to be posthuman and inhabit a posthuman world. What kind of subject is the posthuman being and where does posthumanism leave the human? As Braidotti states in her introduction to *The Posthuman*, the posthuman state has come about as a result of unprecedented progress in the domain of technology and under the pressure of increased globalization in the advanced capitalist era. The posthuman denotes the decentering of the human; it challenges the elitism of anthropocentrism, and it “invokes a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference” (Braidotti 2013, 2) for our species and our relationship with our planet and its inhabitants. As a result of scientific and technological progress, the boundaries between the natural and the cultural are being displaced which, in turn, gives rise to a new figuration of the subject, one that is founded on non-dualisms and instead promotes “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or earth others” (Braidotti 2013,

49). Self-centered individualism and essentialism are therefore replaced by a system of deep ecological multiple-species belongings. Whereas humanism, Braidotti informs us, is aligned with the pathologizing and pejoration of difference and the non-normative, the very constitution of the posthuman is an eclectic amalgamation of diverse elements, reflective of the profound transformations that are taking place.

If the posthuman subject is principally defined by its inter-relationality, then a similar description can be applied to the posthuman landscape. The posthuman landscape or environment is characterized by merging: the merging of external and internal spaces; public and private; the organic and the inorganic; nature and culture; the body and things; the known space and the unknown space. The posthuman landscape is part of a “philosophy of the outside, of open spaces and embodied enactments” (Braidotti 2013, 194) that promotes “an enlarged sense of community which includes one’s territorial or environmental interconnections” (Braidotti 2013, 190). It could be described as a planetary vision, a dissolution of the familiar and the provincial in favor of strange, expansive zones that force us to reconceptualize not just who we are as subjects but also the world that we inhabit. Perhaps most importantly, the posthuman condition as defined by Braidotti, while it invokes the collapse of established systems, has the potential to be regenerative in that it urges us to reflect deeply on our identity and our world, thus paving the way for a new discourse of being that, unlike humanism, is no longer based on protectionism and reductionism. Braidotti writes:

I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming. (12)

However, Braidotti also acknowledges that the posthuman can be seen as terrifying and apocalyptic, spawning anxiety of eventual human extinction. Nonetheless, Braidotti remains ardent in her belief that these fears can be conquered if we are willing to see in the posthuman an improved, more open, more ethical way of being that is not about collapse but, rather, reconfiguration based on transversal alliances with the nonanthropomorphic. It is also, Braidotti argues, a

reconfiguration of the self that is essential if we are to make sense of and keep apace of change in the twenty-first century. Posthumanism, Braidotti writes, “is a way of being worthy of our times, to increase our freedom and understanding of the complexities we inhabit in a world that is neither anthropocentric nor anthropomorphic, but rather geo-political, eco-sophical and proudly *zoe*-centred” (2013, 194).

This potential of posthumanism to provide a more adequate understanding of advanced capitalism and, furthermore, a powerful form of resistance, is reinforced in a more recent essay by Braidotti entitled “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” (2017). Braidotti states that posthumanism, through its foregrounding of embodiment and embeddedness between human and environment, in stark juxtaposition to the traditional disconnection of humanism from organic life, actually has the capacity “to come to the rescue of our species” (2017, 33) rather than necessarily denoting its complete demise.

Like Braidotti, Chen is concerned with understanding the here and now and conscious of the need to improve our relationship with others and our environment. In *La lenteur des montagnes* (and indeed throughout her entire oeuvre), it is clear that she privileges systems of belonging and an openness to the world as opposed to defining identity along more rigid and restrictive parameters. She writes: “J’ai décidé que je ne peux plus m’en tenir à quoi que ce soit de local, que je bois l’eau de toutes les mers, que je respire l’air de tout l’univers” (Chen 2014, 13–14). She acknowledges her subjectivity as part of a larger schema and considers the self to be an assemblage of blurred parts rather than a coherent, single unit. Consideration for the “other” is paramount to Chen. She asks: “Qui suis-je par rapport à l’autre?” (Chen 2014, 19), stating that “[l]’un ne peut être pensé sans l’autre” (Chen 2014, 21). Again, in alignment with Braidotti, Chen is keenly aware of the changes that are taking place in society as a result of scientific and technological advances and realizes that a new understanding of both self and place is required if we are to progress at the same pace. “Notre espèce se transforme,” Chen notes in *La lenteur des montagnes* (2014, 28) and later draws attention to her engagement with and concern for our rapidly evolving present: “Je suis préoccupée par la vie ici et maintenant, par ce qui entoure, temporellement et spatialement, cette humanité à la fois magnifique et affreuse, sublime et souffrante” (Chen 2014, 121). In *Blessures* (2016), Chen’s first novel outside of the “série

fantôme” since its conclusion with *La rive est loin*, the author frequently alludes to the rapidly changing advanced capitalist landscape, referring to “le tsunami de la modernisation” (Chen 2016, 26) and “ce chemin vers la modernité, cette autoroute brutale [...] c’est une fatalité” (27) where everything is crushed along the way by the relentless “marche du temps” (26). It is clear then, that issues such as environmental change, humanity in crisis, technological revolutions, and the emergence of the posthuman, far from having been resolved by the close of Chen’s second series of novels, remain a key preoccupation for the writer. Indeed, Chen considers it as part of her responsibility as a writer to reflect on such changes and, by extension, the future of humanity and the planet, declaring in *La lenteur des montagnes* that “la mission première et la raison d’être du roman est de décrire le destin humain, de tracer en détail le chemin, quel qu’il soit, que parcourent un ou des êtres particuliers” (Chen 2014, 94).

Contextualizing *La rive est loin*

To what extent then does *La rive est loin* signify the decentering of the anthropomorphic in favor of the emergence of a posthuman landscape? As previously mentioned, *La rive est loin* is the last installment in a series of six novels which, when read together, can be interpreted as a steady dismantling of the anthropocentric system from the outset, gradually paving the way for a new, more interrelated mode of being. *La rive est loin* has been deemed a difficult text to decipher by some critics, so much so that Julie Ledoux accuses Chen of plunging the reader into a state of “fâcheuse incompréhension” through “une trame multiple qui désarme plus qu’elle ne charme” (2013). Admittedly, the plethora of intertextual references (a common stylistic feature of Chen’s fiction) seems to necessitate a certain prior knowledge of the author’s wider body of work and the constant slippages between dream and reality are disorienting in parts. Furthermore, the lack of any fixed and knowable reference points (further tropes that emerge frequently in Chen’s writing) can be confusing for the reader. In her review of the novel for *Le Devoir*, Danielle Laurin writes: “Comment aborder ce roman? Comment le lire? Comment en parler? *La rive est loin*, de Ying Chen, ne se laisse pas saisir. Nous sommes dans le flottement, le mystère” (2013). Laurin further comments on the predominance

of the “étrange” and the “indéchiffrable” in the text but also notes that this leads to a certain “envoûtement” that keeps the reader under a narrative spell of sorts (2013). To date, there has been very little critical analysis of *La rive est loin*, and this article will constitute the first in-depth study of the novel.

At a basic plot level, *La rive est loin* recounts a couple’s journey through terminal illness (the husband’s) from its onset to the final stages, the impact that this has on their relationship, and the existential questions that it raises about life and its purpose. The couple that we encounter is the same duo that was first introduced to us in *Immobile* (1998) and which, as previously indicated, recurs throughout the entire “série fantôme.” This particular couple has never enjoyed an easy relationship with other novels in the series referring to the wife’s ongoing discontentment, the husband’s adultery, and their struggle to have a child followed by the loss of a child. It would seem, however, that in this final novel, there is scope for both partners to look afresh at their relationship and reflect perhaps more positively on their union than has been the case thus far. This is no doubt spurred on by the inevitable death of the husband for which they must both prepare throughout the course of the narrative. The novel is split into two voices and alternates between the husband’s point of view (A.) and his wife’s (the recurring unnamed female protagonist of the second series of novels). While this is not the first time that Chen has employed the double voice in her fiction – the same technique occurs in *Querelle d’un squelette avec son double* (2003) – it is, however, the first time that she allows us access to the male/husband’s perspective, which is ironic given that his voice only emerges at the moment of his demise. We also learn that the house in which the couple lives is in a state of dilapidation, as is their village (due to recent earth tremors), and the novel concludes with a full-scale earthquake, a natural disaster that occurs more than once in Chen’s fictional universe (*Querelle* and *Un enfant à ma porte* [2009] come to mind). There are two main ways then to approach this text. First of all, as Laurin remarks, the more intimate narrative of the couple in *La rive est loin* can be viewed as a “métaphore de notre condition d’être humain. De ce pourquoi on vit, on meurt, on aime, on a des enfants. De comment on donne un sens à sa vie, à sa mort” (2013). However, Laurin also notes that it is possible to approach the text through a much wider lens, reading it as a

“métaphore d’une société [...] déshumanisée, en perte. Métaphore d’un monde qui court à sa perte, qui est en train de disparaître” (2013). This second interpretation of *La rive est loin* links in more closely with the posthuman perspective that will be employed in this article where the main focus will be on delineating the disintegration of one order (humanism) and exposing its reconfiguration as a more environmentally interrelated system (posthumanism).

La rive est loin, it would seem, is part of a larger trend that has recently pushed to the fore in Canadian literature, both francophone and anglophone. As Marie Carrière astutely observes, “the dystopian and the apocalyptic have come to characterize a number of post-millennial works by Canadian authors” (2016, 225), and she cites Chen’s *La rive est loin* as one such example. In these texts, there is a clear sense of real as well as perceived threats at both a global and local level emanating predominantly from ecological crises, terrorist movements, technological surveillance, corporate domination, and a general feeling of vulnerability. The collapsed urban landscape in *La rive est loin*, therefore, comes to represent a more widespread social anxiety relating to impending worldly catastrophe and the inscription of the posthuman emerges as an ethical response to an androcentric and anthropocentric order that can no longer stand firm.

To demonstrate the various ways in which the human order is replaced by the posthuman in *La rive est loin*, I will concentrate on two key areas. First, I will examine the representation of the house/city as a symbol of human construction and domestication of nature and show how it is gradually morphing into a posthuman space. Second, I will look at the characters of A. and his wife as representative of two distinct orders: the former signifying humanism (and its deconstruction) and the latter embodying the posthuman (and its triumph). It is not insignificant to note the alignment of the wife with the posthuman perspective given Braidotti’s claims in her 2017 essay that the female and feminism are by their very nature both the antithesis of and antidote to patriarchal and male-centered humanism. Finally, I will conclude that, far from being catastrophic, the demise of the human and human spaces in *La rive est loin* and the concomitant emergence of the posthuman actually offer the possibility of positive transcendence through interrelated reconfigurations.

The house/city and the posthuman space

Right from the outset of *La rive est loin*, both the house and the unnamed city where it is located are in a state of extreme degradation. Everything is on the verge of dissolving into “poussière” (9).¹ There are multiple references scattered throughout the novel to “les ruines” (16), “l’écoulement” (19), “les débris” (36), and “les décombres” (37), in relation to the house itself and also the larger urban setting. This degradation of space and place is not unique to *La rive est loin* and has, in fact, been building up throughout Chen’s “série fantôme.” In *Espèces*, the novel that directly precedes *La rive est loin*, the house inhabited by the same couple is in a similar state of disrepair, “envahie par la moisissure verdâtre [...] une toile d’araignée dans la chambre d’enfant sans enfant [...] le salon reçoit de l’eau [...] la maison entière s’incline de plus en plus vers un côté” (Chen 2010, 142). It is interesting to note the gradual encroachment of nature on the man-made house to the extent that, through its tilting, it is literally becoming earth-bound. This transformation of the house into a posthuman space is revisited in *La rive est loin* with the becoming-fluid of the couple’s abode: “cet endroit [la maison] maintenant qui vacillait comme une île [...], comme une paille flottante se dérochant au moment où il voulait se reposer” (34). Like the house in *Espèces*, it has also been invaded by rot and damp with rain seeping in through the ceiling and wind blowing through windows and doors that no longer close properly. As the female narrator observes, “notre maison était pourrie du dedans au dehors” (45), and it has become impossible to keep nature out. As a result of the recent earth tremors (and also a certain amount of neglect), the house inhabited by the couple in the novel is on the brink of ruins: “[Elle] n’a plus de forme. Elle est plutôt aplatie” (11). The very structure and foundations of the house (which can be interpreted as representative of the human order) are giving way, it would seem, to an alternative natural order.

This denouncement of man-made spaces in *La rive est loin* extends beyond the house alone with the female narrator lamenting “notre rue étroite [...] nos maisons serrées les unes contre les autres” (11), and the quasi erasure of any sign of nature in the “rues presque sans arbres” (86). The urban space presented to the reader, described as “cette zone dévastée” (95), resounds with apocalyptic undertones. The husband

has been dreaming of “ce spectacle de la fin du monde, de notre petit monde” (12) and envisaging his wife “au milieu des déchets” at “cette scène finale” (14). Again, nature, as previously alluded to in the examples cited from *Espèces*, is proving more powerful than any man-made structure. As the husband remarks: “Aucune maison dans cette rue ne peut survivre à des secousses aussi violentes que celles de la nuit dernière” (14). Subsequently, his failure to secure a solid home for his wife causes him to feel like a lesser man (human) for he has been surpassed by the forces of nature: “J’ai mal rempli ma fonction, mal joué mon rôle” (14). This collapse of the house/city in *La rive est loin*, I argue, is symbolic of the gradual deconstruction of human supremacy that underscores much of Chen’s fiction.

It is possible to detect in the apocalyptic landscape of *La rive est loin* a tone of reprimand for human arrogance in relation to nature and what Chen labels as “la mentalité gourmande du temps moderne” (118). Humanity is depicted as “défiante” (86) and blindly unwilling to acknowledge the potential of nature to de-center human dominance. Human cities are built on the premises of “l’étroitesse, l’enfermement et l’exclusion” (93), and overpopulation is destroying the planet: “la fécondation humaine comme une fatalité” (117). As conveyed through the husband’s dreams in which he imagines himself in a village where the inhabitants are willing to sacrifice one of their own newborns to the mountain gods (96), humans are depicted as concerned only with their own survival and prepared to destroy life in order to ensure this. The husband comments: “Nous appartenons à une génération égoïste. Nous marchons sur le dos de nos ancêtres aussi bien que sur nos enfants. Nous leur prenons tout l’espace” (95). It is worth noting that it is only as his illness takes hold (and it is not inconsequential to point out that he is suffering from a brain tumor), that his logic and reasoning begin to shift away from being aligned with human and patriarchal supremacy and towards a better appreciation of his interconnectedness with nature. Indeed, it is the husband who declares that humans will one day be punished for their destruction of the planet in the name of their own selfish advancement: “Maintenant l’on ose me dire [...] qu’il n’y a pas eu de chute mais seulement des montées, une infinie progression vers l’éternel. Ceux qui parlent comme cela seront giflés. Ceux qui parlent comme cela dans notre rue seront même enterrés vivants” (23).

As Debra Benita Shaw notes, the increasingly unstable distinction between human, animal, and machine that is homologous with the posthuman throws established and accepted cartographies of the city into doubt (2013, 779). Subsequently, a new mapping out of the city that is reflective of the imbrication of its posthuman inhabitants in its architectural structures and design is required. The urban collapse to which we bear witness in *La rive est loin* is representative, it would seem, of this desire to re-imagine space through the lens of posthuman theory. As previously stated, if we take the house in *La rive est loin* and the town where it is located to represent human construction and man's desire to mold his environment to fit his own personal needs, then it is clear that the legitimacy of anthropocentric urbanism and order is being called into question by Chen. The rooms of the house in *La rive est loin* no longer serve the function that was designated for them; for example, the basement where the husband so carefully organized his archeological finds is in a state of disarray:

Et maintenant, tout est aplati, il n'y a même plus d'air, plus d'espace à exposer, à exploiter afin de marquer la distance et la différence entre les objets de ma collection, la distance et la différence entre les peuples, la distance et la différence entre la civilisation des êtres et l'invention des choses. Le jeu est terminé lorsque les traces du temps sont enfin brouillées et que le temps est enfin reconnu comme plus grand que nous. (55)

The basement can be correlated with the museum and by extension, human logic. As Shaw argues, the museum is concerned with “the limiting of possible bodies through a spatial arrangement of artefacts as a sequence of development which arrives at something called ‘human’ through strategic exclusions and taxonomic differentiations” (2013, 783). The reference, then, to the blurring between the husband's objects in the cellar due to the earth tremors and the overall disintegration of the house is interesting as it hints at a new system of inter-relationality (the posthuman) in opposition to the exclusionary and hierarchical order of humanism. The once sturdy and durable house is now positioned as little more than a transitory inter-space: “dans le fond, cette maison comme toutes les autres n'est qu'une auberge de plus sur notre chemin menant vers un autre temps, une petite île sur notre passage vers une rive lointaine, imaginée et

incertaine” (13). It is not just the house that is crumbling, but the whole town/city in which it is situated as well. Other buildings are subject to the earth tremors and are becoming dilapidated and, as previously noted, the town/city is attributed with the human vices of arrogance, selfishness, and greed, all of which, it is suggested, will eventually lead to its downfall and, by extension, the downfall of humanity/humanism. The use of pathetic fallacy in the novel is another indicator of a change in orders that is about to take place, a posthuman turn where the hierarchy between nature and culture is broken down and they become indistinguishable from one another, with the sounds of the earth becoming confused with human voices:

L’atmosphère est lourde depuis des jours. Les nuages s’accumulent. [...] Un orage va éclater. [...] Des rumeurs semblent monter du fond de la terre. Des rumeurs descendent aussi du haut du ciel. Il y a des voix. Je ne les distingue pas. Mais il y a des voix. (23)

However, it is a change that has the potential to be enriching by bringing about a shift from an inward-looking perspective to one that is more outward-bound. Of his surroundings, the husband remarks: “Pour une fois, on peut voir loin d’ici, on peut presque voir l’horizon d’un côté, le fleuve de l’autre, même dans notre rue étroite, à partir des maisons serrées les unes contre les autres. [...]. Le ciel devient plus large” (11). It is also worth commenting on the title of the novel in relation to the discussion of posthuman space and place. Roughly translating into English as “The Shore is Far Away,” the title of the novel clearly makes reference to a state of floating or fluidity and the impossibility and, by extension, undesirability, of fixed boundaries. The preference then, as indicated by the title, is for perpetual movement, continuous becomings, and an expanded rather than a bordered environment.

The couple and posthuman subjectivity

I would now like to turn to the representation of the couple in *La rive est loin* and explore its connection with the emergence of a posthuman logic in the novel. In comparison with the rest of the novels comprising Chen’s “série fantôme,” the unnamed female protagonist and her husband A. appear to represent two opposing symbolic orders

which can be read as the posthuman and the human, with the former gradually encroaching on, eroding and eventually upending the other. A., the husband, the male, with his “discours sûrs et solides” (74) and his profession as archeologist (concerned with classifying and ordering), can be said to signify humanism: “Lui qui se servait du cerveau pour des fonctions qui outrepassaient le stade basique, animal et organique” (74). He is described as “un réservoir de réponses, de solutions et de leçons” (74) who is concerned with “expliquer, instruire, chercher des faits et des preuves” (74) rather than being open to alternative, more fluid ways of being. His wife, who appears from the very first novel of the series to represent another form of logic, states: “Parfois il m’arrivait de détester son cerveau quand il faisait de la science” (74). Her husband, she notes, “ne pouvait pas dépasser cela, sa subjectivité” (74), which we can read as not being able to think beyond the confines of the human. His brain tumor however, as remarked earlier, thwarts this once monolithic and self-assured stance. His illness “lui faisait sentir malgré lui qu’il ne devait être sûr de rien, qu’il ne pouvait tout voir et tout expliquer, qu’il suffisait de vivre, que peut-être il vivrait mieux sa vie s’il cessait de vouloir [...] la maîtriser” (75). He comes to the realization that “le travail de classer et d’identifier est fastidieux et vain face à [...] la complexité infinie de la nature, à l’immensité du temps” (137). The brain tumor, therefore, is highly metaphorical and can be viewed as a gradual dismantling of uniform human logic and an opening out to a new, more sinuous and transversal way of being. The more the tumor spreads, the closer the husband shifts to a posthuman subjectivity. He experiences dreams of metamorphosis, “transformé en quelque chose d’autre [...] un esprit [...] sans corps” (83), and reveals to the doctor that when the latter tries to speak to him, it is no longer a human voice that he hears. Instead, he sees mountains and shadows (79), signs that he is entering further into a “becoming-nature” stage.

It is not insignificant to note that the relationship between A. and his wife (which is strained to say the least throughout the rest of the fictional series), improves dramatically in *La rive est loin*. Here they finally appear to reach a better understanding of each other, perhaps due to the fact that the husband is embracing a posthuman subjectivity which, until now, has been solely aligned with the female protagonist. The wife’s position of otherness in the husband’s world is highlighted at several points of *La rive est loin* in a rhetoric that calls to mind the

posthuman. She speaks in “une voix qui n’avait plus rien d’humain” (13) and is described as “rempli d’un sentiment antihumain” (16). On observing his wife asleep on her chair, the husband remarks “il semble qu’il ne lui reste plus de chair” (38). The wife’s otherness, or, rather, posthuman state, threatens the order represented by the husband:

Elle voit un désert ancien quand elle se promène dans une rue moderne. Elle voit un fantôme quand elle rencontre un voisin. Son regard déforme ma ville natale. Elle nous déshumanise tous. Cela constitue une vision affreuse. Une vision même dangereuse [...]. (15)

In a scene where the wife is driving the husband’s car (again, it is significant that he has given up driving with the car being loaded with masculine and patriarchal symbolism), there is what could be termed a posthuman moment in the novel, a merging with nature. Watching his wife follow the afternoon light, the husband remarks: “Elle avait envie de les poursuivre [les lumières], de les rattrapper, de les boire à grands coups, de se transformer par la suite en une lumière elle aussi, rien qu’une lumière” (63). And further on, we read: “Dans les yeux de ma femme, j’ai vu notre voiture se transformer en une fumée lumineuse qui voltigerait au coeur des montagnes. Vu de loin, elle pourrait ressembler à un soleil filant. Nous étions sûrs de faire partie du paysage” (69). Up until the final novel of the “série fantôme,” it has always been the wife trying in vain to fit into the husband’s world, whereas now it is the husband who is transforming in line with his wife with the latter remarking, “A. me semblait enfin s’approcher d’un monde qui m’était familier” (73). In a transfiguration that is similar to the description of his wife’s “becoming-sunlight” cited above, he states that “maintenant que le toit est tombé, il n’y a plus d’étage, je reçois du soleil sur la figure” (55) and continues, “Je suis devenu lumineux. Je suis tout pâle mais lumineux” (56).

If we take the female protagonist then as representative of the original posthuman subject in Chen’s oeuvre, it is worth elaborating on her constant sense of estrangement in her husband’s world/the human order: “notre rue où j’avais connu l’isolement” (7); “cette rue à laquelle je ne mêle pas” (7); and “cette ville étrangère” (9). Although not suffering from any illness as fatal as her husband’s brain tumor, there are nonetheless many indications of poor health in relation to the character

of the wife in *La rive est loin* (and, indeed, throughout the entire “*série fantôme*”), with A. making reference to her “*vieilles plaies*” (67) and her general “*souffrance*” (67). More often than not, her undiagnosed and ongoing sickness is aligned with poor mental health. She is treated as if she were “*un malade mental*” (115) who is blighted with “*déraison*” (53).

In the same way that I argue for a metaphorical interpretation of the buried female in *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* as signifying a struggle with an eating disorder (Rodgers 2017), I would like to propose here that the wife's suffering, “*son immense sentiment d'insatisfaction*” (54) with her existence in her husband's world, be read as a form of “*solastalgia*.” The term “*solastalgia*” was first coined by Glenn Albrecht (2005) to highlight the relationship between ecosystem distress and human distress. According to Albrecht, if there is a steady decline away from the integral unity of man and earth, if humans are increasingly divorced from their roots in nature and land, then this can manifest itself as a loss of psychic stability (2005, 41–42). In the case of the female protagonist, it is possible to link the recurring poor health that is referred to in *La rive est loin* and elsewhere, and which comprises feelings of disorientation, dislocation, and melancholia, to what could be considered as an environmental assault on her subjectivity. Although etymologically derived from the term “*nostalgia*,” “*solastalgia*” is “*not about looking back to some golden past*” (Albrecht 2005, 45). Instead, it is “*the lived experience of the loss of the present*” where there is a “*direct experience of transformation or destruction of the physical environment*” (Albrecht 2005, 45–46).

There is no doubt in *La rive est loin*, and throughout the “*série fantôme*,” that the female protagonist's immediate environment is suffering under the effects of the capitalocene and advanced technology. This is particularly evident in the descriptions of the para-city which rises up on the other side of the river in opposition to or as a replacement for the one that has recently been hit by a series of natural disasters and where the couple resides. This para-city stands as the perfect example of an increasingly capitalist-driven and technologically orientated future. It is a place where artificial light has replaced the sun, buildings have taken the place of trees, where everything unfolds at an accelerated pace, and where private and public have become blurred. It is presented as a vulgar, infectious city, a place where the machine has usurped both nature and the human: “*Des*

lumières, des bruits, des voix, des paroles privées rendues publiques par les cellulaires, les chansons interminables qui se ressemblaient entre elles, l'odeur de nourriture et d'essence, tout affluait vers nous en même temps, nous pénétrait, nous inondait" (87). The people who live there are unrecognizable as humans: "En sortant du restaurant, j'ai rappelé à mon mari que ce garçon ne ressemblait à personne que nous connaissions" (89). Over time, behaving like these inhabitants will bring about a "becoming-machine" which is not considered as liberating in the same way that "becoming-nature" is in *La rive est loin*. During a day trip to this new city, the female protagonist notes of her husband that "la rapidité du service, celle aussi des paroles et des mouvements qu'on percevait dans cet endroit, exerça un effet mécanique sur lui" (88). This particular vision of a technologically centered posthuman future, in stark contrast to the "becoming-nature" side of posthumanism is nothing short of apocalyptic.

Tous [...] se rendront, se mettront à genoux, devant le rapide écoulement du temps et l'annulation de distance, devant l'accélération de toutes choses désormais vertigineuses, devant le brouhaha permanent, devant l'abondance de données virtuellement infinie. (35–36)

The image of the type of subject that will emerge from such a technologically advanced society inspires fear: "[des] citoyens futurs vraisemblablement privés de sexe, immortels, sans progéniture mais sans cesse renouvelés par la machinerie" (123); and "une foule multicientenaire dont les hormones seront en désordre malgré les pilules correctives. Le nouvel homme n'aura pas de plaisir ni de paix en étant simplement ce qu'il est" (125).

Conclusion

In my analysis of *La rive est loin*, I have demonstrated the extent to which it is possible to read the novel (and, moreover, the entire "série fantôme") as a treatise on the devastating effects of the anthropocentric drive towards human progress to the detriment of the biosphere. In response to this destruction, Chen advocates for human accountability and posits an alternative vision of existence, the posthuman, which is more conscious of its inter-relatedness with nature and the

environment. The collapsing house and city that we encounter in *La rive est loin* are, as I have argued, symbolic of the dismantling of one order (the human) and its gradual replacement with a posthuman landscape and subjectivity. In line with Braidotti's philosophy, which focuses on the affirmative and vitalist aspects of the posthuman with its possibilities for expansion and promoting synchronicity with the environment and "the transcendence of negativity" constituting a key feature of posthuman thought (2013, 191), the scene of absolute urban breakdown in the concluding chapter of *La rive est loin* is mitigated by images of renewal and reconfiguration. Despite the unfolding chaos, there is a sense of peace and "confiance à la nature" (136) as the female protagonist joins her dying husband in the basement. As the last remaining ruins of the already dilapidated city and house prepare to crumble completely under the force of the most recent earthquake, rather than sink into despair, the female protagonist celebrates the opportunity for renewal that the disaster will provide: "le luxe de revoir le monde du fond du néant" (138).

One of the novel's final images is that of luminosity amidst the rubble of the city: "le soleil qui illumine le désert environnant" (140). To return to Braidotti, what appears to be happening in *La rive est loin*, far from being catastrophic, is actually an act of unfolding onto the world and an enfolding of the world into us. By the end of *La rive est loin*, humankind has not been rendered obsolete but, rather, has been drawn into an alternative eco-philosophical version of the future where "l'animalité primitive chez l'humain est ce qu'il y a de plus durable, de plus permanent" (137–138), and new subject figurations will prosper through their embracing of the non-human. With the natural light filtering through the ruins of the old city, it is also possible that Chen is gesturing towards a re-imagination of the urban space where a hybrid bio-city, a product of both nature and humanity and a refreshing alternative to the noxious technology infused landscape of the para-city, will become the new habitat of its more-than-human subjects.

Note

1 Henceforth, citations from *La rive est loin* will be indicated by page number alone, rather than the full author/date citation.

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