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Interview: David Lombard

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When did you start at the Faculty?

I started on the same day my FNRS research fellow fellowship started, that is on October 1, 2020.

What did you do before that?

I worked as a high school English and Spanish teacher in Wallonia for a few months in 2017 (after my second master's degree), and then as an English teacher at the University of Liège for about three years. I was also working as a pre-doctoral researcher at the same time, and I presented at a few conferences, and published an article and a book entitled *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology, and the Capitalocene* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019).

Which university did you study at?

I studied at the University of Liège in Belgium. I have a bachelor in modern (Anglophone and Hispanic) languages and literatures, a master in the same area with a research focus, and an advanced master in the same area but with a teaching focus (the one that gives you the *Agrégation de l'enseignement secondaire supérieur* [AESS] certificate and allows you to teach in high schools in Wallonia).

What courses did you take?

I was mainly interested in American literature as an undergraduate student. This interest probably emerged when I was spending a four-month Erasmus stay at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom during the third year of my Bachelor and was introduced to the likes of Ralph W. Emerson, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, and Henry D. Thoreau by Professor Nick Everett. These writers and thinkers wrote about nature and abolitionism, and I wanted to do research on and write about literature that was somehow committed to social, political, and/or ecological causes, and that helped me think about these issues and the questions I was asking myself. I pursued that trajectory when I came back to Belgium, and took seminars, among other courses, in American abolitionist literature and U.S. contemporary culture and literature.

Where are you from?

I was born in the city of Liège but I grew up in the countryside, in a village called Outrelouxhe (near the town of Huy) in Belgium.

Can you explain your research area?

I'm currently working at the intersection of several fields, mainly American literary studies, rhetorical narratology, life-writing studies, and the environmental humanities. My current PhD project consists in a rhetorical and narratological analysis of the sublime in the contemporary American ecobiographical memoir. I'm interested in how the sublime is deployed, as an aesthetic and rhetoric, to represent the human self in relation to our (changing) environments, and I explore the memoir as a resourceful genre for portraying the intricacies of this relationship.

Can you tell a bit more about your duties?

My main duties are, of course, doing research, writing my dissertation, and completing my PhD. However, I've also been involved in a variety of other research projects (e.g., publishing, editing special issues, presenting at international conferences, organizing scientific events, ...) as well as service and public outreach activities. For

example, I was a representative for the scientific staff at the Faculty Council for two years and have been a representative for non-permanent FNRS researchers at the University of Liège (I'm doing a joint degree between KU Leuven and the *Université de Liège*). I've also worked with non-academic centers such as Etopia by writing general-audience articles and organizing or chairing events.

What subjects do you teach?

My focus is now on research, but I occasionally teach classes for my supervisor (Professor Michel Delville) at the University of Liège. For instance, I've given a couple of classes on ecodystopian literature in the context of a course on the history of Anglophone literature as well as a couple of classes on Anglophone poetry. Besides, I've been invited to give lectures at other universities, such as a lecture on nature writing at the *Université catholique de Louvain* and another one on ecocriticism—a field that, broadly speaking, studies the relationship between literature and environment—at the *Université de Lorraine*.

Which teacher or professor has impressed you most?

I have been inspired by many professors since the beginning of my studies. My supervisors, of course, Michel Delville, Pieter Vermeulen, and Lewis H. Ulman, but also other professors I met on other occasions such as Véronique Bragard, Heather Houser, Philip J. Barrish, Thomas S. Davis, and James Phelan.

What do you enjoy most in your current work environment?

KU Leuven and the University of Liège offer diverse and challenging work environments. One of the things I really like about centers/groups such as the English Literature Research Group and the Center for Health Humanities in Leuven, or the Interdisciplinary Center for Applied Poetics in Liège, are the opportunities of engaging with other people's research—which may be very different from mine—that they create. Such collaborations have often helped me improve or even rethink my own work and arguments, and I'm very fortunate to be part of these environments.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

Playing and listening to music, essentially. Music was my first passion, and when you play it (I play the guitar, among other instruments), it becomes an emotionally fulfilling, embodied, and collective (at least in a band and/or in front of an audience) experience. Music is also connected to my other passion (and job), literature, in so many ways and I like to think of them as complementary.

If you could ever go on a 'professional Erasmus' for a year, which university would you choose?

I've just come back from a very productive seven-month research stay in the United States (four months at the University of Texas at Austin, and three months at the Ohio State University), so home feels like the right place to be right now.

If your house was on fire, what would you try to save?

First my partner (if she doesn't save me first) and then my guitars. I would love to save my books and records but there are just too many of them. Let's just try to avoid that fire, shall we?

Do you have a motto?

I've tried to answer that question, but I think my brain can't function with one single motto.

What is your favorite food and drink?

The food or drink that's shared with the right people.

What's your favorite time of day?

In the morning, when I'm sufficiently caffeinated and awake to enjoy birds singing in our garden.

What's the biggest learning experience you've had?

I've had so many of them, and sometimes from unexpected places or media, that it's hard to tell. Maybe a combination of postmodernism (e.g., Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*), Tom Petty ("most things I worry about never happen anyway") and Rick and Morty ("nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere"), which has taught me that things may not always matter as much as we think they do. Or should they?

What's the best compliment you've ever received?

That my music or writing made somebody else feel good or better.

What makes you smile the most?

Smile or laugh? If both, *The Simpsons*.

What's inspiring you in life right now?

I've been reading a lot of theory in rhetorical narratology lately, since I've just completed a research stay at Project Narrative, at the Ohio State University. I've been inspired by the approach of the field itself, which is really useful and convincing to dissect all kinds of narratives (and not only literary works).

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