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Reading Beyond Gender in Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, *L'Argent*, and *La Joie de vivre*

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said about how Émile Zola uses fragmented corporeality and subjectivity in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) to critique the implications of modern commerce for women. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the fact that Zola attributes the same features to male experiences of modernity in *L'Argent* (1891). Through an ecocritical analysis that moves beyond the gendered dimensions of individual novels, this article compares the crowds of *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* to the coastal narrative of *La Joie de vivre* (1884) – re-evaluating Zola's use of aquatic imagery while examining the equally intriguing recurrence of dust.



KEYWORDS

Zola; gender; city; crowds; ecocriticism; water; dust

In one of Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels, a large, interior space designed to spark commercial appetites becomes flooded with a deindividualised, frenzied, and corporeally fragmented crowd. The narrator describes 'une masse compacte de chevelures' and 'des mains tendues fébrilement', adding that 'on s'écrasait dans la salle' due to 'un piétinement énorme' (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 310). These quotations are not, as one might suspect, taken from *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) – the author's renowned portrayal of department store activity in Second Empire Paris. They appear in *L'Argent* (1891), which deals with financial speculation at the city's stock exchange during the same historical period. The mistake would nevertheless be an easy one to make, as the language used in *L'Argent* recalls several crowd scenes in *Au Bonheur*. Comparing the longer passage to which the above-quoted phrases belong with one such scene reveals how extensively Zola recycles a descriptive model of the crowd, transferring it from the shop floor to the trading floor in a way that involves relatively little alteration:

Au Bonheur des Dames

Et, sous la fine poussière, tout arrivait à se confondre, on ne reconnaissait pas la division des rayons: là-bas, la mercerie paraissait noyée; plus loin, au blanc, un angle de soleil, entré par la vitrine de la rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, était comme une flèche d'or dans la neige; ici, à la ganterie et aux lainages, une masse épaisse de chapeaux et de chignons barrait les lointains

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du magasin. On ne voyait même plus les toilettes, les coiffures seules surnageaient, bariolées de plumes et de rubans. (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 492)

L'Argent

Dans le compartiment du comptant surtout, [...] une masse compacte de chevelures, pas même de visages, un grouillement sombre qu'éclairaient seulement les petites notes claires des carnets, agités en l'air. Et, à la corbeille, [...] des cheveux grisonnaient, des cranes luisaient, on distinguait la pâleur des faces secouées, des mains tendues fébrilement, [...] on s'écrasait dans la salle, un piétinement énorme, [...] et seuls, au milieu de l'effacement des redingotes, les chapeaux de soie miroitaient, sous la lumière diffuse, qui tombait du vitrage. (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 310)

The hats and hairstyles of female shoppers in *Au Bonheur* ('une masse épaisse de chapeaux et de chignons', 'les coiffures seules surnageaient') are replaced in *L'Argent* by those of male traders ('une masse compacte de chevelures', 'des cheveux grisonnaient', 'les chapeaux de soie miroitaient'). Further parallels are found in the negative constructions 'pas même de visages' (*L'Argent*) and '[o]n ne voyait même plus les toilettes' (*Au Bonheur*), with the disappearing 'toilettes' finding an alternative in 'l'effacement des redingotes'. As if to make clear that his stock exchange is a textual space inspired by that of the department store, Zola even retains an injection of natural light; the 'angle de soleil, entré par la vitrine de la rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin' (*Au Bonheur*) becomes 'la lumière diffuse, qui tombait du vitrage' (*L'Argent*).

One significant difference between *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* is the fact that while most of the customers enticed by the department store are female (the store's owner, Octave Mouret, places the exploitation of women at the 'summit' of modern commerce),¹ the stock exchange is a predominantly male space (women being excluded from the trading floor).² What the passages quoted above indicate is that despite the differentiating factor of gender, Zola's traders can be considered a reincarnation of his shoppers on sale days. This article explores how and why such doubling occurs, as well as the implications it has for our broader understanding of Zola's fiction. Through an ecocritical analysis that moves beyond the gendered dimensions of individual texts, I argue that the urban-oriented crowd sequences of *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* bear underappreciated connections not only to one another, but also to the coastal narrative of *La Joie de vivre* (1884).

By examining two novels about city life alongside a text that is seemingly at a far greater remove from the metropole, this article counteracts a persistent delineation of the urban and the rural in scholarship on the *Rougon-Macquart* as well as a longstanding tendency to focus on the gendered aspects of Zola's fiction. Close readings of crowd sequences in *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* show that fragmented corporeality and destabilised subjectivity – features often associated with the impact of modern commerce on women in the former novel – are just as prominent at the stock exchange as they are in the department store, meaning the disorienting effects of modern life can be seen to span male and female experience. This is followed by an expanded analysis that traces a convergence of ecological and sociocultural concerns, with the tempestuous, sea-like crowds of *Au Bonheur* and *L'Argent* being compared to the actual seas and storms depicted in *La Joie de vivre*. Central to these novels are boundary-defying flows of various kinds (water, money, goods, people) which, even when involving or set in motion by human characters, have the potential to surpass human control and the

capacity – be it literal or perceived – to destroy life. Although this comes to the fore in the existential anxieties of human characters, there is a decentring of the human that links the coastal narrative of *La Joie de vivre* to the urban, sea-like crowds of *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent*. Bringing an ecocritical perspective to bear on such connections, this article traces a preoccupation with humans' ecological instability through recurrent references to two substances: water and dust.

Crowds, Water, and Dust in Zola's Fiction: An Ecocritical Perspective

Most of Zola's novels were published in the late nineteenth century, a period defined by Gustave Le Bon as '*l'ère des foules*' ([1895] 2013, 2, emphasis original). In *Psychologie des foules* (1895), the most renowned theoretical text about crowds to appear in the 1800s,³ Le Bon claims to operate 'comme le naturaliste, commençant par déterminer les caractères généraux des individus d'une famille puis les caractères particuliers qui différencient les genres et les espèces que renferme cette famille' ([1895] 2013, 10). This sentence is reminiscent of the terms through which Zola frames his own work of literary naturalism, *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*. In claiming to adopt a naturalist method, both Zola and Le Bon are influenced by the work of Hippolyte Taine – whose analysis of the French Revolution also invites comparison with the revolutionary nature of crowds described in Le Bon's theoretical texts and Zola's *Germinal* (1885).⁴

In addition to the connections highlighted above, what is notable about *Psychologie des foules* is the extent to which the ideas presented resonate with Zola's fictional depictions of crowds – many of which predate Le Bon's text. To quote J. H. Matthews, this suggests that the novelist had a 'genuine, instinctive comprehension of crowd psychology' that both anticipated and influenced Le Bon's theory (1958, 113). References to a collective soul, the notion that crowds have a religious character, and the suggestion that they bring out atavistic instincts are all features that link Le Bon's analysis to Zola's novels and to *Germinal* in particular.⁵ Le Bon also uses aquatic imagery to evoke the deindividuation he considers to be at work in crowds, asserting: 'L'hétérogène se noie dans l'homogène' ([1895] 2013, 12). This is another strong conceptual link with Zola's work; as Naomi Schor notes in her authoritative work on the topic, the novelist's 'recurrent crowd metaphor [...] is oceanic' (1978, 84).⁶

Crowds have long been understood with reference to water. As Jeffrey Schnapp points out, the notion of the oceanic crowd is traceable at least as far back as Greco-Roman culture, while by the end of the nineteenth century the association of crowds with the sea was 'firmly established in the Western socio-political imagination' (2002, 246). Offering an alternative perspective, Christian Borch uses the concept of 'social avalanche' to explore the sense of rupture common to crowds, cities, and financial markets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2020, 9). During this period, writes Borch, various forms of social change produced situations 'in which individuals felt the ground disappearing beneath them' (2020, 19) – though experiences of financial markets stand out due to the potential for stocks to plummet and investors to become caught up in frenzied behaviour (2020, 6). As we shall see, Borch's conceptualisation of 'social avalanche' is germane to interpreting moments that foreshadow and follow the stock market crash in Zola's *L'Argent*.

Though informed by the ideas outlined above, this article does not re-evaluate Zola's crowd sequences within the framework of a particular crowd theory. Instead, it revisits the novelist's use of aquatic imagery in descriptions of urban crowds, forging an integrated analysis of city and coast that builds on recent studies of seas, rivers, climate, and weather in and beyond the *Rougon-Macquart*.⁷ Underpinned by the view that reading beyond gender enables a fuller comparative and ecocritical appreciation of Zola's novels, the article scrutinises examples of uncontrollability which connect the volatility of the sea to that of money and modernity – two entities often understood in liquid terms,⁸ whose fluid properties expose the vulnerability and existential anxieties of Zola's human characters. Similarly, drawing on ecocritical approaches to dirt, the interpretations of dust presented in this article stress the ways in which Zola's writing foregrounds ecological processes in which human characters are not necessarily central and over which they have limited control.

A crucial similarity between the crowd sequences of *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* is the frequency with which Zola draws attention to corporeal fragmentation and destabilised subjectivity. These features are central to Susan Harrow's reassessment of corporeality in *Zola, The Body Modern* (2010), in which she claims that scholars have been 'rapturously and almost exclusively attentive to the erotic body' (2010, 13). It is precisely such skewed attentiveness, I would argue, that has led commentators to linger on female experience in the crowd sequences of *Au Bonheur des Dames* while overlooking those episodes which involve male characters and neglecting the novel's connections to other Zolian texts in which men are more prominent still. In this article, confronting the intersection of male and female experience in *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* is the starting point for an ecocritical take on a range of interconnecting factors.

The Crowd Sequences of *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent*

The symmetry between *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) and *L'Argent* (1891) is clear when comparing Zola's preparatory notes for each novel. In the *Ébauche* for *Au Bonheur* (part of the *dossier préparatoire*), the author declares:

Je veux dans *Au Bonheur des Dames* faire le poème de l'activité moderne. Donc changement complet de philosophie: plus de pessimisme d'abord, ne pas conclure à la bêtise et à la mélancolie de la vie, conclure au contraire à son continuel labeur, à la puissance et à la gaieté de son enfantement.⁹

Several years later, *L'Argent* is presented in very similar terms: 'Je voudrais, dans ce roman, ne pas conclure au dégoût de la vie (pessimisme). La vie telle qu'elle est, mais acceptée, malgré tout, pour l'amour d'elle-même, dans sa force',¹⁰ In both novels, there is indeed much to suggest that the author embraces change and endeavours to provide an optimistic interpretation of modern life. This is not to say that the negative aspects of modernity are overlooked – the department store and the stock exchange are two of Zola's modern machines,¹¹ and their potential to 'overwhelm subjectivities' (Harrow 2010, 180) is recognisable in the corporeally fragmented, deindividualised nature of the crowds they entice.

The optimistic outlook emphasised by Zola in the *Ébauches* for *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent* recalls a passage found in the chronologically intermediate *La Joie de vivre*

(1884). In the latter novel, having come to terms with the bodily changes involved in puberty, the character of Pauline Quenu experiences a newfound enthusiasm described as ‘la vie acceptée, la vie aimée dans ses fonctions, sans dégoût ni peur, et saluée par la chanson triomphante de la santé’ (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 857). This passage echoes the rejection of ‘dégoût’ and the acceptance of life ‘dans sa force’ outlined in the *Ébauche* for *L’Argent*, revealing a physiological counterpart to ideas that read in sociocultural terms elsewhere. Pauline’s cousin, Lazare, is afraid of death – a trait that was passed on to him from Zola.¹² A follower of Schopenhauerian philosophy, Lazare embodies the very pessimism that the novelist ostensibly rejects in his plans for *Au Bonheur* and *L’Argent*. Ultimately, though, the physical vulnerability and psychological anxieties experienced by characters in all three novels make for a far greater degree of resonance than this contrast suggests.

In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the destabilising effects of the *grand commerce moderne* are strongest in the sale sequences of Chapters 4, 9, and 14. The following extract, taken from Chapter 9, is a case in point:

Des piles de rubans écornaient les têtes, un mur de flanelle avançait un promontoire, partout les glaces reculaient les magasins, reflétaient des étalages avec des coins de public, des visages renversés, des moitiés d’épaules et de bras; pendant que, à gauche, à droite, les galeries latérales ouvraient des échappées, les enfoncements neigeux du blanc, les profondeurs mouche-tées de la bonneterie, lointains perdus, éclairés par le coup de lumière de quelque baie vitrée. (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 627)

Numerous scholars have commented on Zola’s use of corporeal fragmentation in this passage, as well as the ways in which human bodies are shown to intermingle with goods and the fact that this blurs the distinction between consumer and commodity.¹³ Even the body parts described here are distorted in some way: ‘des visages renversés, des moitiés d’épaules et de bras’ (my emphasis). The reflections of ‘des visages renversés’ link back to an image found in the novel’s opening chapter, when the department store windows cast reflections of mannequins with price tags instead of heads onto the street: ‘les reflétaient et les multipliaient sans fin, peuplaient la rue de ces belles femmes à vendre, et portant des prix en gros chiffres, à la place des têtes’ (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 392). Again, this description has attracted substantial attention. While for a long time the dominant interpretation was that it foregrounds the commodification of the female body in largely negative ways (a conclusion often drawn of the novel as a whole),¹⁴ recently it has been suggested that the passage offers a more positive – or at the very least, a more open – take on female identity.¹⁵ The mannequins of *Au Bonheur des dames* have also begun to receive ecocritical attention, though debate here continues to centre on the implications of modern commerce for women.¹⁶ Little attention has been paid to the ways in which the headless mannequins and sale sequences of *Au Bonheur* connect to other scenes, not to mention other *Rougon-Macquart* novels, in which corporeal fragmentation has implications for male experience, too.

Although the standout crowd sequences in *Au Bonheur des Dames* focus on female shoppers, men are by no means absent from the eponymous department store. Nor do all instances of corporeal fragmentation in this novel concern female bodies. As Kate Foster points out, one example of male bodily fragmentation is that of the chief

cashier, L'homme, who lost his arm in an omnibus accident (2022, 85). Elsewhere in the novel, corporeal fragmentation involving men is less a physical reality than a descriptive feature that highlights the destabilising effects of modern commerce so often associated with female customers. In Chapter 10, we encounter 'un piétinement d'employés, des bras en l'air, des paquets volant par-dessus les têtes' (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 652–53). The lack of gender specificity in this sentence, together with the knowledge that many of the store's employees are men, leads us to conclude that both sexes are involved in this disorienting rush of arms and heads. The description reminds us of '[le] piétinement énorme', 'des mains tendues fébrilement', and 'des carnets, agités en l'air' found in the description of the trading floor in *L'Argent* quoted at the beginning of this article (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 310) – indicating that in the Zolian imaginary, the connection between modern life, corporeal fragmentation, and destabilised subjectivity is by no means unique to female customers in the department store. When Zola turns his attention to financial speculation in *L'Argent*, male traders are subjected to the same fragmentary, disorienting fate as both shoppers and employees in *Au Bonheur des Dames*.

In the following passage, taken from the tenth chapter of *L'Argent*, corporeal fragmentation combines with a depiction of weakened cognitive and communicative faculties:

L'effroyable vacarme devenait tel, au milieu d'une gesticulation épileptique, que les agents eux-mêmes ne s'entendaient plus. Et, tout à la fureur professionnelle qui les agitait, ils continuèrent par gestes, puisque les basses cavernes des uns avortaient, tandis que les flûtes des autres s'amincissaient jusqu'au néant. On voyait s'ouvrir les bouches énormes, sans qu'un bruit distinct parût en sortir, et les mains seules parlaient: un geste du dedans en dehors, qui offrait, un autre geste du dehors en dedans, qui acceptait; les doigts levés indiquaient les quantités, les têtes disaient oui ou non, d'un signe. (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 309–310)

The traders involved in this crowd can no longer hear each other and are unable to produce intelligible sounds – although they communicate through hand gestures, the fact that this is referred to as 'une gesticulation épileptique' implies a loss of conscious control. The use of body parts as verbal subjects is suggestive, as *parler*, *indiquer*, and *dire* are all verbs of communication that are linked to the act of thinking. By attributing them to hands, fingers, and heads respectively, Zola decentres the agency that is inherent to human communication and supposedly rooted in the head, distributing it across a range of disjointed signifiers that appear to be acting of their own accord. In this regard, the extract quoted above is reminiscent of the following passage from *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which department store employees carry out the inventory at the end of the day:

Les voix se haussaient encore, on ne voyait que la gesticulation des bras, vidant toujours les cases, jetant les marchandises, et on ne pouvait plus marcher, la crue des piles et des ballots, sur les parquets, montait à la hauteur des comptoirs. Une houle de têtes, de poings brandis, de membres volants, semblait se perdre au fond des rayons, dans un lointain confus d'émeute. (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 670)

This 'morsellized evocation' of the department store workforce (Harrow 2010, 59) prefigures Zola's description of financial traders in more ways than one. It is as though the heads, fists, and flying limbs gesture not only to one another, but also to the hands, fingers, and heads depicted in Zola's later novel. Though the 'gesticulation des bras'

described in *Au Bonheur* is less suggestive of illness than the ‘gesticulation épileptique’ found in *L’Argent*, the reference to ‘un lointain confus d’émeute’ means there is still a strong suggestion of disorder. References to the nullification of voices, a reliance on gestures, and an overarching sense of confusion also connect Zola’s take on working in modern commerce – which involves both men and women – to his depiction of financial speculation.

It is important to note that although the crowds of traders in *L’Argent* are male, the narrator highlights ‘quelques têtes de femme, qui se penchaient, là-haut, à la galerie du télégraphe, étonnées du spectacle de cette salle, où elles ne pouvaient entrer’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 296). Several pages later, this observation is repeated: ‘En haut, à la galerie du télégraphe, des têtes de femme se penchaient, stupéfiées, épouvantées, devant l’extraordinaire spectacle’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 310). These references to women’s heads in an episode that is otherwise focused on men’s bodies invites us to read *L’Argent* through its connections to *Au Bonheur des Dames*, and to recognise a destabilising effect that spans male and female experience. Even though the sentences quoted above serve a demarcating function, the women involved are also exposed to corporeal fragmentation – Zola chooses to describe ‘des têtes de femme’, when he could easily have opted for ‘des femmes’. This individuation of heads recalls the use of the same technique in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. The location of the women in this scene – ‘à la galerie du télégraphe’ – can also be taken as an intertextual reference to Zola’s earlier novel, in which the fragmented corporeality of crowds on sale days revolves around the galleries of the department store. A further connection to *Au Bonheur des Dames* is the theme of spectacle. When Madame Desforges, one of the store’s customers, observes the *rez-de-chaussée* from the first floor, her impression of the crowd is described as ‘un nouveau spectacle, un océan de têtes vues en raccourci’ (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 631). Through the two mentions of ‘des têtes de femme’ in *L’Argent*, Zola reworks this image, placing women’s heads at an elevated vantage point that separates female observers from the ‘spectacle’ of gesticulating men.

Madame Desforges’s view of ‘un océan de têtes’ points to another recurrent feature of Zola’s crowd sequences: the combination of corporeal fragmentation and aquatic imagery. It should be acknowledged that these techniques are not exclusive to *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L’Argent*. On the opening day of the art salon in *L’Œuvre* (1886), Claude Lantier is met by ‘un flot de foule’ outside the Palais de l’Industrie (Zola [1886] 1960–67, 117). Inside this building, the crowd of salon attendees is described as ‘la houle des épaules’ (Zola [1886] 1960–67, 121) and ‘le flot des têtes’ (Zola [1886] 1960–67, 123), moving with ‘le roulement d’une marée qui allait battre son plein’ (Zola [1886] 1960–67, 126). Meanwhile, in *Germinal* (1885), the crowd of striking miners is presented as ‘le flot des têtes’, emitting ‘[u]n grondement’ that is likened to ‘un vent d’orage’ (Zola [1885] 1960–67, 1376). Elsewhere in this novel, there is a reference to ‘la houle des têtes’ (Zola [1885] 1960–67, 1380), while the miners’ voices are said to have ‘[un] souffle de tempête’ (Zola [1885] 1960–67, 1384).

Zola’s use of aquatic imagery is in fact so extensive, pervading his fictional output and extending far beyond the depiction of crowds, that it is arguably impossible to provide a holistic interpretation of all the novels in which it appears. There are nevertheless reasons to delve further into the connections between *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L’Argent*. Within the urban, capitalist institutions of the department store and the stock exchange,

Zola effects a descriptive fusion of crowds, water, and money that culminates in an acute sense of uncontrollability. This invites comparison with the destructive potential of water explored by the novelist elsewhere, in narratives that are more overtly ecological. When reading the crowd sequences of *Au Bonheur* and *L'Argent* alongside descriptions of coastal storms in *La Joie de vivre*, we find a convergence of sociocultural anxieties pertaining to volatile economic flows and existential fears surrounding the unstoppable forces of nature.

Water, Money, and the Significance of *La Joie de vivre*

Several flows are at work in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. In addition to sea-like crowds that fill the eponymous department store and rain that affects such footfall,¹⁷ commercial activity is driven by a constant *flot de marchandise*. This image appears on two occasions in the novel, with only minor syntactical differences – we read of ‘ce continuel flot de marchandise’ at the end of Chapter 8 (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 610) and ‘le continuel flot des marchandises’ in Chapter 12 (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 708). In *L'Argent*, too, aquatic imagery is used to evoke monetary flows. The novel’s protagonist, Aristide Saccard, is a strong believer in the progressive effects of capitalism and declares that ‘rien n’[est] possible sans l’argent, l’argent liquide qui coule, qui pénètre partout’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 125–26). To a degree, then, as Brian Nelson observes, aquatic imagery can be seen to reflect Saccard’s – and so, perhaps, Zola’s – ‘vision of money as a vital, fecundating force’ (1980, 285).

Elsewhere in *L'Argent*, aquatic imagery is far more suggestive of a threat to life. In Chapter 1, as Saccard walks through Paris, he is struck by the distant clamour of the Bourse: ‘le bruit de la marée lointaine continuait, l’obsédait, ainsi qu’une menace d’engloutissement qui allait le rejoindre’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 26). The fact that the sound of the Bourse is described in oceanic terms and perceived by Saccard as having the potential to swallow him reminds us of another Zolian protagonist whose experience of the city involves significant distress; in the opening chapter of *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), Florent Quenu is introduced to the regurgitative market pavilions of Les Halles (another of Zola’s modern machines)¹⁸ and experiences a visceral sense of drowning in sea-like market produce.¹⁹ As Larry Duffy asserts, Zola employs liquid imagery alongside metaphors of engulfment and digestion in both *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Argent*, which links the theme of capitalist expansion in these novels to that of fat versus thin (*les gras* versus *les maigres*) in *Le Ventre de Paris* (2018, 183–84). The prospect of *engloutissement* also links the sea-like flows of *L'Argent* and *Au Bonheur* to the actual sea which, in *La Joie de vivre*, threatens to submerge human characters and nonhuman phenomena alike.

In *L'Argent*, the trope of *engloutissement* relates to the engulfment of funds as well as the potential for human characters to be consumed by money. An example of the latter comes when Caroline Hamelin, Saccard’s assistant, expresses concerns about the protagonist’s lax attitude to financial regulations. In a turn of phrase that evokes the experience of ‘social avalanche’ conceptualised by Borch in relation to financial markets, Caroline is described as having ‘une singulière sensation de terrain mouvant, une inquiétude de chute et d’engloutissement, au premier faux pas’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 112). In response to Caroline’s reservations, Saccard waxes lyrical about the merits of financial speculation,

exclaiming that ‘l’humanité n’a pas de rêve plus entêté ni plus ardent, tenter le hasard, obtenir tout de son caprice, être roi, être dieu!’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 115). The dream shared by Saccard and his business partner, Georges Hamelin (Caroline’s brother) is to finance projects in the Middle East with funds raised on the stock market through the newly created Banque Universelle – a plotline that can be seen to prefigure both the utopian and the imperialistic themes of Zola’s *Quatre Évangiles* novels.²⁰ While the seemingly limitless nature of this ambition is clear in the allusion to becoming both king and God, the fact that it is described as being ‘entêté’ is equally pertinent. Though used here to underline the obstinacy or stubbornness of an ambition that is explicitly human (‘l’humanité’), later in *L’Argent* the adjective *entêté* reads as a marker of human vulnerability in relation to nonhuman agency. This decentring of the human comes into much sharper focus when read alongside passages from *La Joie de vivre*.

In a letter addressed to Paul Alexis on 13 August 1875, written during a visit to Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer in Normandy, Zola asserts: ‘Je prends des notes, à chaque nouvel aspect de la mer, pour un grand épisode descriptif d’une vingtaine de pages que je rêve de glisser dans un de mes romans’ (1980, 409). Although the prevalence of oceanic imagery in Zola’s fiction suggests that he ‘slid’ such descriptions into several texts, the desire to do so (which undermines the author’s later claim, in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), to avoid description for description’s sake)²¹ is realised most directly in *La Joie de vivre*. In the opening chapter of this novel, which is set in the fictional village of Bonneville on the Normandy coast, the narrator describes ‘la mer, la gueuse, qui battait les falaises’, adding that ‘chaque flot en s’écroulant ébranlait la maison’ (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 828). Shortly afterwards, we read of ‘le tonnerre grondant de la tempête’, ‘la pluie entêtée [qui] battait les ardoises’, and ‘le vent [qui] ébranlait les fenêtres’ (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 833). Here, in ‘la pluie entêtée’ as in the forceful words ‘battait’, ‘ébranlait’, and ‘grondant’, we encounter the stubbornness not of human ambition – as in the ‘rêve [...] entêté’ of humanity described by Saccard (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 115) – but of nonhuman actants.

Returning to *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L’Argent*, we find that Zola’s fascination with organic phenomena – described by Daniel Finch-Race as ‘ecosensitivity’ (2021, 147) – surfaces in urban spaces and infiltrates narratives of sociocultural events. In *Au Bonheur*, crowds of shoppers are likened to swelling seas and overflowing rivers on several occasions; in Chapter 4 we encounter ‘[u]ne houle compacte de têtes, [...] s’élargissant en fleuve débordé’ (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 491), while in the final chapter we read of ‘la houle désordonnée des têtes’ (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 797). In the opening chapter of *L’Argent*, crowds gather outside the Bourse with ‘la violence débridée d’une marée haute’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 47). This destructive potential is unleashed in Chapter 10, when crowds of traders fill the Bourse ‘des secousses profondes et du retentissement d’une marée haute’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 301). In the same chapter, there are references to ‘la houle violente des têtes’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 305), ‘la tempête déchaînée des têtes’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 310), and ‘la houle effarée des têtes’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 326).

It is telling that in the passages quoted above, references to water are frequently paired not only with the individuation of heads, reinforcing the destabilisation of human form and subjectivity in these commercial spaces, but also with adjectives connoting excess and disorder: ‘débordé’, ‘désordonnée’ (*Au Bonheur*); ‘violente’, ‘déchaînée’, ‘effarée’ (*L’Argent*). There is therefore a sustained fixation on uncontrollability, as there is in *La*

Joie de vivre – albeit one that relates most overtly to forces of money rather than nature. For Harrow, Zola’s ‘magisterial evocation of landscape and seascape’ in *La Joie de vivre* shows humans ‘to be in the grip of natural forces they cannot mitigate, far less control’ (2020, 136). By replacing the word ‘natural’ with ‘sociocultural’, this observation can be applied to *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L’Argent*. For in these texts, human vulnerability in relation to the literal threat of water becomes linked to the amalgamative volatility of crowds at the department store and the stock exchange, merging as it does so with the destabilising and potentially overwhelming effects of monetary flows. In addition to the ‘confluence’ of ecological and sociocultural factors that Finch-Race identifies in certain sections of *La Joie de Vivre* (2021, 151), there is a deep-running convergence of ecological concerns and sociocultural anxieties that extends across all three novels.

In *La Joie de vivre*, Lazare can only watch on helplessly when a breakwater he constructed is destroyed during a violent coastal storm: ‘Rien ne résista plus, [...] ce fut une déroute, il ne restait que la mer victorieuse, balayant la plage’ (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 986). Notably, *déroute* is one of the words used to describe the stock market crash in *L’Argent*: ‘cut fut la débâcle, la déroute s’aggravant et important la foule en un galop désordonné’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 329). This sentence points to the *Rougon-Macquart* novels between which *L’Argent* (1891) is sandwiched in terms of publication order. The ‘galop désordonné’ suggests an unbridled horse, an image that is evoked in the description of the runaway train at the end of *La Bête humaine* (1890),²² while the reference to ‘la débâcle’ anticipates Zola’s war novel of the same name (1892). Battlefield metaphors are used repeatedly during the financial crash in *L’Argent*, as they are in the aftermath of sales in *Au Bonheur*, which reiterates the influence of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune on Zola’s retrospective narrative of the Second Empire.²³ References to a crushing defeat (‘la déroute’) and the ‘victorious’ sea in *La Joie de Vivre* also suggest a lingering preoccupation with military conflict. The convergence of ecological concerns and sociocultural anxieties constitutes an equally rich layer of signification linking *La Joie de vivre* to *L’Argent* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*.

When the ‘marée haute’ overflows at the Paris Bourse in *L’Argent*, Saccard – like Lazare during the coastal storm in *La Joie de vivre* – is left to confront his own failure: ‘c’était sa défaite, à jamais’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 330). The protagonist hears his surroundings collapse – ‘il avait entendu les cours s’effondrer’ – and prepares to die upright – ‘il s’était raidi pour mourir debout’ – as if bracing himself for an oncoming wave (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 330). Once again, such descriptions call to mind the experience of ‘social avalanche’ conceptualised by Borch (2020, 17) and serve as a realisation of the fears raised by Caroline Hamelin earlier in the novel (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 112). During the same scene, amidst the chaos on the trading floor, it is noted that ‘la pluie entêtée ruisselait toujours sur le vitrage’ (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 329). For a moment, then, the reader is transported from the tempestuous stock exchange to the storm-battered rooms of a house on the Normandy coast and the ‘pluie entêtée’ described in *La Joie de vivre* (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 833). At the same time, we are reminded of the ‘rêve [...] entêté’ extolled by Saccard earlier in *L’Argent* (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 115). The ‘pluie entêtée’ mentioned towards the end of this novel can therefore be read not only as a nod to the protagonist’s failed dream, but also as a marker of limited human agency that connects the quest for economic, geopolitical, and religious supremacy to the desire for mastery of the natural environment.²⁴ Water is not the only entity

through which the impossibility of complete dominance in each of these areas can be seen to converge. Dust, which often occupies the same physical and textual spaces as water, is another significant juncture between human characters' exposure to uncontrollable sociocultural forces and their instability within the natural order.

From Water to Dust

Following the storm that destroys Lazare's coastal flood defences in Chapter 7 of *La Joie de vivre*, which is preceded by the death of his mother in Chapter 6, the character's existential anxieties are compounded by the sight of the sea:

Cette mer, avec son éternel balancement, son flot obstiné dont la houle battait la côte deux fois par jour, l'irritait comme une force stupide, étrangère à sa douleur, usant là les mêmes pierres depuis des siècles, sans avoir jamais pleuré sur une mort humaine. C'était trop grand, trop froid, et il se hâtait de rentrer, de s'enfermer, pour se sentir moins petit, moins écrasé entre l'infini de l'eau et l'infini du ciel. (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 989)

Here the 'infini' of sea and sky offers a physical manifestation of the infinite nothingness that Lazare fears, triggering what David Baguley describes as 'l'angoisse devant la temporalité et devant la mort' (1974, 85). Interestingly, Lazare is attracted to the cemetery 'malgré sa terreur du néant' (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 989). This indicates that while the sea is highly symbolic in *La Joie de vivre* (which is the focus of Baguley's analysis), its contingent physicality remains of central importance. The passage quoted above stresses ecological processes that both pre-date ('depuis des siècles') and will outlast ('son éternel balancement') any individual human life. Moreover, the reference to a 'flot obstiné' recalls the phrase 'pluie entêtée' through the emphasis placed on nonhuman agency that is seemingly impervious to the actions or indeed the absence of human beings ('sans avoir jamais pleuré sur une mort humaine'). Lazare's desire to feel 'moins petit' therefore takes on a double meaning, relating not only to physical smallness but also to the realisation that his own life is relatively inconsequential within the natural order.

The eleventh and final chapter of *La Joie de vivre* opens with another description of the storm-battered Normandy coast: 'des tempêtes avaient ravagé les côtes, éventré des falaises, englouti des barques, tué du monde' (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 1107). By linking four past participles to the same auxiliary verb, Zola conveys the relentlessness of storms while stressing their indiscriminate impact on human and nonhuman phenomena. The aggression evoked by the words 'ravagé', 'éventré', 'englouti', and 'tué' reads as a chilling nod to Lazare's fear of being 'écrasé' between sea and sky. Here, though, focus shifts from the existential angst of the individual to the ecological vulnerability of the area at large, with the provocatively ambiguous 'du monde' emphasising a less personal but more pervasive threat to life. The use of verbs with physiological connotations blurs the distinction between animate and inanimate, with cliffs having been disembowelled and boats swallowed. The past participle 'englouti' is particularly notable in this regard, signalling the completion of an act that is threatened in the 'engloutissement' sensed by Saccard in relation to the sea-like stock exchange described in *L'Argent* (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 26). Here, the image of *engloutissement* combines with that of *éventrement* to underline an ecologically composite loss of life that involves, yet is by no means centred around, human beings. It is notable that the verbal objects in the

phrase are ordered in terms of decreasing size, which emphasises the relatively small status of humans within the process of environmental damage taking place – as does the fact that ‘du monde’ is the only reference to people in the paragraph to which this quotation belongs.²⁵ Following on from Lazare’s desire to feel ‘moins petit’ in relation to the sea, such factors form part of an ecologically-oriented preoccupation with human smallness and insignificance that runs through the novel.

Water is not the only entity through which Zola’s writing can be seen to decentre or even diminish the status of human characters, with dust being another striking example in the novels under scrutiny. During the sale depicted in the ninth chapter of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the narrator remarks: ‘la foule n’était plus qu’une poussière humaine’ ([1883] 1960–67, 627). On the one hand, ‘une poussière humaine’ could be interpreted as Zola tempering the amalgamative properties of the crowd by signalling that this dust is composed of human beings. Alternatively, the phrase can be seen to push the suggestion of corporeal disintegration and emphasise the inevitable transition of human bodies to dust – as the burial epitaph ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ (‘la terre à la terre, les cendres aux cendres, la poussière à la poussière’) reminds us, and as the double negation employed by Zola (‘n’était plus que’) encourages us to infer. When read as a problematisation rather than an affirmation of human exclusivity, Zola’s tendency to attach the adjective *humain* to nonhuman entities (elsewhere in *Au Bonheur* we read of ‘ce fleuve humain’ ([1883] 1960–67, 765), while in *L’Argent* there is a description of ‘une montée continue d’insectes humains’ ([1891] 1960–67, 20) and two references to ‘les fourmis humaines’ ([1891] 1960–67, 59; 77)) indicates that the author is repeatedly drawn to humans’ potential to *be* or *become* something else.²⁶

Dust was, of course, ubiquitous in Second Empire Paris due to the demolitions and construction involved in Baron Haussmann’s renovations. Marni Reva Kessler points out that in addition to forming a literal layer throughout the city, dust had an extensive impact on social changes during this period – influencing women’s relationship with urban space through the adoption of veils, while playing a significant role in the conflation of physical dirt, physiological disease, and moral degeneracy.²⁷ In Zola’s *La Curée* (1872), which sees Aristide Saccard make his fortune as a real estate speculator prior to launching the Banque Universelle in *L’Argent*, there is a description of a building site that includes references to falling plaster dust – ‘de la poussière de plâtre qui tombait’ – as well as carriages disappearing ‘sous une croûte de poussière’ ([1872] 1960–67, 581–82). Scholars have noted Saccard’s attraction to dust and dirt in this novel, with Hannah Thompson remarking that ‘Haussmannization seems to suit him’ (2013, 192) and Jessica Tanner arguing that the character’s construction of a speculative empire is ‘coterminous’ with Zola’s own production of aesthetic and commercial value ‘through the appropriation of Paris as literary capital’ (2015, 115). There are, indeed, clear connections between Saccard’s enthusiasm for construction dust in *La Curée* and his penchant for dirty business dealings. However, thinking ahead to events of *L’Argent* and to the ways in which Saccard’s celebration of ‘liquid money’ backfires, the control the character seems to exert over dirt feeds into an extended narrative of curbed agency and overreaching ambition.

In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, too, references to dust underline infrastructural, social, and economic changes that took place in the French capital during the Second Empire.

One such change is the threat posed by the *grands magasins* to much smaller retail establishments. When construction is taking place for the department store's expansion, dust is shown to infiltrate a boutique belonging to the Baudu family, whose lives and livelihood are at risk:

Les Baudu désespérés regardaient cette poussière implacable pénétrer partout, traverser les boiseries les mieux closes, salir les étoffes de la boutique, se glisser jusque dans leur lit; et l'idée qu'ils la respiraient quand même, qu'ils finiraient par en mourir, leur empoisonnait l'existence. (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 597)

The beginning of this passage recalls Saccard's description of 'l'argent liquide qui coule, qui pénètre partout' (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 126), with the difference being that the dust described here is a life-threatening substance rather than the life-sustaining 'liquid money' extolled by the protagonist of *L'Argent*. If, according to Mary Douglas, dirt is 'matter out of place' ([1966] 1991, 36), the dirtying action of dust in this passage is clear not only in the verb 'salir', but also in the invasion of space evoked by the verb 'traverser' and the phrase 'se glissait dans leur lit' (my emphasis). However, when taken as a form of dirt, this 'poussière implacable' is better understood with reference to the ecological enmeshment discussed in Heather Sullivan's 'Dirt Theory' (2012). The Baudu family's inhalation of dust shows that their bodies have become 'nodes of potential change in exchanges with a grimy environment' (Sullivan 2012, 521), indicating that the boundaries separating human characters from physical dirt are fundamentally unstable. Sullivan writes of corporeal immersion in environments that 'are always with us but never entirely under our conscious control' (2012, 528). This reminds us that dirt, which in some instances can be considered an example of the agency yielded by both Zola and his human characters,²⁸ is in other cases an entity that exceeds physical and narrative control.²⁹ Through its pervasiveness and uncontrollability, dust therefore intersects with flows of crowds, water, and money in *L'Argent*, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, and *La Joie de vivre*.

References to dust in *La Joie de vivre* enrich the aquatic imagery that dominates the novel, offering up further connections with other *Rougon-Macquart* texts. During an episode that contrasts the description of Lazare's desire to run away from the sea, Pauline is seemingly transfixed by it: 'Ce spectacle semblait l'absorber, malgré la poussière d'eau où maintenant tout se confondait, une poussière grise qui montait de la mer, criblée par la pluie' (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 910).³⁰ The sea mist described here is evidently very different from the dust that spreads through nineteenth-century Paris in Zola's narratives of the French capital. Nevertheless, the description of 'la poussière d'eau où maintenant tout se confondait' recalls the phrase 'sous la fine poussière, tout arrivait à se confondre', which appears in the passage from *Au Bonheur des Dames* quoted at the beginning of this article (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 492). Although these extracts refer to visual confusion experienced in geographically distant and contextually different settings, they form a syntactical overlap whereby coast and city meet once again. For the reader, there is a sense that these near-symmetrical quotations signal a merging of the texts themselves as well as the spaces being described.

The act of watching connects the passage quoted above to other sections of *La Joie de vivre*; as Margot Szarke points out, characters are repeatedly shown observing the sea, which in turn means that readers 'see and enact a repeated spectatorship' (2023, 8,

emphasis original).³¹ The ‘spectacle’ observed by Pauline also puts us in mind of Mme Desforges as she looks upon that of the sea-like crowd in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 631). In Pauline’s case, the fact that the spectacle seems to absorb her – ‘semblait l’absorber’ – can be interpreted not only as an indication of the sea’s visual allure at a given moment in time, but also of its more sinister, amalgamative potential. The imperfect conjugation of the verb *sembler* is suggestive in its distortion of impression and reality, tempting us to read the absorption described here as being somehow connected to the *engloutissement* depicted elsewhere in the same novel and that which is intimated in Zola’s urban seascapes. This is one of many connections that might go unnoticed when focusing too narrowly on the gendered aspects of Zola’s fiction, or when taking the sociocultural themes of his urban novels to be distinct from the ecological focus of certain rural and coastal narratives. Such is the importance, as our own readerly standpoint evolves, of remaining alert to new lines of comparison when engaging with Zola’s rich literary output.

Conclusion

Comparing instances of fragmented corporeality, destabilised subjectivity, and aquatic imagery in *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *L’Argent* shows that there is a need to look beyond the exploitation of women and the commercialisation of female bodies that has seen the former novel receive considerably more scholarly attention than the latter. The affinities between Zola’s portrayal of modern commerce and his subsequent depiction of financial speculation indicate that these sociocultural phenomena both have a destabilising potential that comes to the fore in crowd sequences, which constitutes a link between male and female experience. Ecocritical analysis takes our understanding of this connection further still, illuminating points at which it is not men or women but rather human beings who are at risk. A three-way comparison of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, *L’Argent*, and *La Joie de vivre* reveals a convergence of sociocultural and ecological anxieties, which plays out through human characters’ vulnerability in relation to the forces of nature and modernity.

Attending to the connections between *Au Bonheur des Dames*, *L’Argent*, and *La Joie de vivre* from an ecocritical standpoint prompts a recalibrated understanding of Zola’s literary landscapes as well as a re-evaluation of environmental tropes that run through his novels. In narrative terms, the similarities between sea-like crowds that populate urban institutions and the sea that batters a Normandy village counteract the geographical separation of city and coast. The fact that this textual proximity involves repeated, interconnected references to water and dust reinforces the convergence of sociocultural and ecological concerns in these novels; a preoccupation with humans’ relative smallness, exposure, and limited agency within the natural order may be more overt in *La Joie de vivre*, but it is equally recognisable in *L’Argent* and *Au Bonheur* upon closer examination. Of course, these three novels belong to a twenty-volume series which, itself, is part of a much larger body of work. There is little doubt, therefore, that the intersection of ecological factors with other dimensions of Zola’s writing – including the much-discussed issue of gender – extends to other texts within and beyond the *Rougon-Macquart*, in ways that are yet to be explored.

Notes

1. '[Mouret] acheva d'expliquer le mécanisme du grand commerce moderne. Alors, plus haut que les faits déjà donnés, au sommet, apparut l'exploitation de la femme' (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 460–461).
2. An edict of 1724 meant that women were excluded from the trading floor at the Paris Bourse, though this did not prevent them becoming involved in the domain of financial speculation through other means – see Christophe Reffait's editorial note in the 2009 Flammarion edition of *L'Argent* (Zola [1891] 2009, 36, n. 2).
3. Christian Borch reminds us that Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* appeared against the backdrop of 'an existing, if only embryonic' set of works by other French and Italian theorists (2012; 38).
4. See Borch 2012, 23–47.
5. In *Germinal*, the striking miners' descent into what is presented as atavistic violence offers clear parallels with Le Bon's declaration that the crowd brings out the barbaric instincts of its individual members: 'Isolé, c'était peut-être un individu cultivé, en foule c'est un instinctif, par conséquent un barbare' (Le Bon [1895] 2013, 14). The fact that the crowd of striking miners in *Germinal* is described as being 'emportée d'une seule âme' (Zola [1885] 1960–67, 1375) calls to mind Le Bon's assertion that the crowd has 'une sorte d'âme collective' ([1895] 2013, 11). Similarly, Zola's portrayal of a crowd that is moved by '[u]ne exaltation religieuse' ([1885] 1960–67, 1380), presenting 'l'impatience d'une secte religieuse' ([1885] 1960–67, 1385), resonates with Le Bon's conclusion that crowds have '[un] sentiment religieux' ([1895] 2013, 39).
6. According to Schor, Zola's crowds 'are the royal way to an understanding of some of the fundamental questions which obsessed' the author, namely 'the *anxieties* of origin and difference' (1978, xi, emphasis original). With reference to several novels, Schor outlines a Zolian 'crowd curve' that manifests in four stages (emptiness, swelling, saturation, and discharge), using this to trace a breakdown of differences along 'axes' of male and female, friend and foe, living and dead (1978, 83–121).
7. Scholarship in this area includes Abbey Carrico's work (2019) on flooding in Zola's short story 'L'Inondation' (1875), Daniel Finch-Race's 'ecocritique' (2021) of *La Joie de vivre* (1884), Johannes Ungelenk's reading of the *Rougon-Macquart* as an overheating weather system (2018), and Jessica Tanner's analysis of 'Zola's Atmospheres' (2017).
8. Commenting on the fluidity inherent in money with reference to Zola's *L'Argent*, David Baguley asserts: 'Il y a dans l'argent une instabilité, une fluidité sémiotique fondamentale. Il fonctionne dans un univers mouvant, où les intérêts courent, montent et baissent, les valeurs flottent et fluctuent' (2005, 39). When reflecting on the liquid properties of modernity and on fluidity as a form of changeability, we might recall Zygmunt Bauman's theorisation of 'liquid modernity' – according to which 'change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty' (2012, viii, emphasis original).
9. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS NAF 10277, fol. 3 <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9079744m/f3.item>>.
10. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS NAF 10268, fol. 378 <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90797681/f387.item>>.
11. In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Denise Baudu's first impression of the eponymous department store is that of a machine: 'Alors, Denise eut la sensation d'une machine, fonctionnant à haute pression, et dont le branle aurait gagné jusqu'aux étalages.' (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 402) The same metaphor is applied to the stock exchange building in the opening chapter of *L'Argent*: 'La trépidation, le grondement de machine sous vapeur, grandissait, agitait la Bourse entière, dans un vacillement de flamme.' (Zola [1891] 1960–67, 32)
12. Zola's fear of sudden death is noted in the extensive physical and psychological assessment of the novelist carried out by Édouard Toulouse (1896, 260).
13. To quote Rachel Bowlby, 'the people present are marginalized [...] broken up into warped or divided body parts' (1985, 72). Elizabeth Carlson concurs, adding that mirrors 'blur the

boundary between animate and inanimate' and create 'kaleidoscopic [...] mosaics of flesh' (2012, 128). Meanwhile, Susie Hennessy asserts that Zola's conflation of shoppers and merchandise points to 'the interplay between desire and desirability upon which consumption hinges' (2008, 699).

14. For example, Brian Nelson highlights the description of headless mannequins alongside other scenes when arguing that the women in Zola's department store 'become commodity images, mere bodies, manipulated, mindless' (1993, 238).
15. Kate Foster contends that the 'back-and-forth between woman and mannequin', whereby each seems to imitate the other, 'helps to expose the indeterminacy of women's social position/s' (2022, 81).
16. Sara Phenix and Daryl Lee compare the mannequins described in *Au Bonheur des Dames* to prehistoric Venus figures, arguing that the 'consumerist manias' of female shoppers in Zola's novel are 'pathological manifestations of the instinctual drive to attract mates through display' (2020, 356). See also Phenix's work on the corset as a garment that connects fashion to fertility in *Au Bonheur* (2022).
17. The first sale depicted in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Chapter 4) gets off to a slow start due to a morning downpour, with crowds of shoppers only arriving in the afternoon – 'l'écrasement de l'après-midi' follows 'la désastreuse matinée, due sans doute à une averse tombée vers neuf heures' (Zola [1883] 1960–67, 482).
18. '[Les Halles] apparurent comme une machine moderne, hors de toute mesure, quelque machine à vapeur, quelque chaudière destinée à la digestion d'un peuple' (Zola [1873] 1960–67, 626).
19. 'La mer continuait à monter. [Florent] l'avait sentie à ses chevilles, puis à son ventre; elle menaçait, à cette heure, de passer par-dessus sa tête. Aveuglé, noyé, [...] il demanda grâce, et une douleur folle le prit, de mourir ainsi de faim, dans Paris gorgé, dans ce réveil fulgurant des Halles.' (Zola [1873] 1960–67, 633–634)
20. Brian Nelson (1980, 286) contends that the 'creative potential' assigned to money in *L'Argent* 'looks forward' to the utopian themes of *Travail* (1901), while Jennifer Yee (2016, 100–101) argues that *L'Argent* offers 'a foretaste of the Zola who, [...] was to become an unabashed apologist for French imperialism and the ideology of progress' in *Fécondité* (1899).
21. Referring to himself and other members of the French Naturalist school in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), Zola writes: 'Décrire n'est plus notre but; nous voulons simplement compléter et déterminer. [...] Cela revient à dire que nous ne décrivons plus pour décrire, par un caprice et un plaisir de rhétoricien.' ([1880] 1966–70, 1299)
22. 'C'était le galop tout droit, la bête qui fonçait tête basse et muette, parmi les obstacles. Elle roulait, roulait sans fin, comme affolée de plus en plus par le bruit strident de son haleine.' (Zola [1890] 1960–67, 1330)
23. For analyses of *Au Bonheur des Dames* that focus on the retrospective influence of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, see Scott 2016, 8–70 and Brevik-Zender 2015, 29–68.
24. This proximity between the themes of *L'Argent* and *La Joie de vivre* is an area in which ecological approaches might inform postcolonial research, building on Yee's examination of the relationship between race, empathy, and geographical distance in the latter novel (2022).
25. 'Après un mois de mai abominable, les premiers jours de juin furent très chauds. Le vent d'ouest soufflait depuis trois semaines, des tempêtes avaient ravagé les côtes, éventré des falaises, englouti des barques, tué du monde; et ce grand ciel bleu, cette mer de satin, ces journées tièdes et claires qui luisaient maintenant, prenaient une douceur infinie.' (Zola [1884] 1960–67, 1107)
26. Christopher Robison has explored this problematic through connections between humans, animals, and machines, arguing that a 'Human-Animal-Machine trichotomy' runs through Zola's fiction (2021).
27. See Kessler 2006, 1–33.
28. Jessica Tanner identifies a 'Naturalist ecology of dirt and vice' through which Zola's prefaces and theoretical texts can be seen to 'strategically inscribe and domesticate the work of his

critics' (2019, 73), while Kasia Stempniak reads Clorinde Balbi's sullied clothing in *Son Excellence Eugène-Rougon* (1876) as an instrument of soft power through which the character exerts spatial and political agency (2022). Both Tanner and Stempniak draw on Michel Serres's association of pollution and appropriation in *Le Mal propre* (2008).

29. See my reading (Maddison 2022) of the uncontainability and uncontrollability of dirt in Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877).
30. Susan Harrow has analysed this passage with regard to Zola's use of colour and painterly techniques, arguing that the transition from 'poussière d'eau' to 'poussière grise' takes the reader from assumed transparency to opacity (2011, 480–481).
31. Szarke links the recurrence of sea-watching scenes in *La Joie de vivre* to readerly experiences of lethargy and boredom, arguing that these mirror the *ennui* of the novel's characters (2023).

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Notes on Contributor

Sophie Maddison completed her PhD at the University of Glasgow, defending her thesis ('Urban Interconnections: Ecocritical Readings of the City in Works by Matilde Serao (1856–1927) and Émile Zola (1840–1902)') in February 2023. This article is an extended version of a paper that won the Postgraduate Prize at the 2022 conference of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes. Sophie is also the author of "'Ciò è immondo; ma è la verità': The Entanglement of Dirt and Truth in Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884; 1906) and Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877)', (*Modern Language Review*, 17 (2022)). In addition to preparing her doctoral thesis for publication, she is exploring connections between literary representations of Naples and Paris that span the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

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