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Decolonial Ecology by Malcom Ferdinand: Epistemic and Aesthetic Decenterings

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Translated from French by the author

In this essay, I propose to discuss certain points of Malcom Ferdinand's seminal book, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, originally published in French in 2019, then in English translation in 2022, from my perspective as a French researcher specializing in the literatures of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and attentive to Latin American feminist and decolonial theories. From this position, which I acknowledge to be partly illegitimate—because I am not Caribbean myself and work in a completely different discipline from that of Ferdinand's work, which has nonetheless nourished my own scholarship—I will insist on three elements in particular that seem essential to me in this book: the fundamental importance of *Decolonial Ecology* in decentering the French metropolitan gaze—I will point to certain experiences from the areas I study that could complement the analysis proposed by Ferdinand; the essay's more global project of deconstructing dichotomous thinking, for which I will point out a few elements that I feel could be clarified, in the light of Latin American decolonial theories; and the aesthetic dimension that runs through *Decolonial Ecology* and plays a full part in its power and impact, which I will analyze from my training and somewhat oblique position as a philologist. But before embarking on this discussion, I will begin by sketching out here an overview of the main contributions of this book, which undoubtedly marks a before and after in thinking about the catastrophe in progress.

The decolonial ecology Ferdinand proposes is based on the premise of a "colonial and environmental double fracture" that he sees as characteristic of modernity: from this perspective, environmental and anticolonial movements operate in silos, failing to join in a common struggle. Thus, environmentalism produces a "colonial ecology" by invisibilizing colonization and slavery, while anticolonialism, antislavery, and antiracism have difficulty integrating the impact of colonial rule on ecosystems into their thinking and struggles.[1] The central concept in Ferdinand's book is undoubtedly that of "colonial inhabitation" (25–35). Defined by three series of interdependent principles, acts, and characteristic features, colonial inhabitation makes it possible not only to understand the existence of this partition into two watertight compartments but also to envisage a third way of rearticulating them, by rethinking the exploitation of natural resources, on the one hand, and that of human beings, on the other, as two sides of a single colonial project: a "way of inhabiting the Earth" (123) characterized by the establishment of a relationship of subordination (the taking of land and private property) by commercial exploitation (the clearing of land and the generalization of the plantation system) and by the negation and rejection of the other (the massacres, the violence, the exploitation of human beings).

In so doing, Ferdinand opposes the "global grand narrative of the Anthropocene" (124), which unifies and homogenizes not only the lived experiences of an environmental catastrophe already underway and manifesting itself unevenly across territories but also those responsible for it. In this sense, he is part of the same movement as other researchers in France and elsewhere who, over the last ten years, have been striving to decolonize the Anthropocene by highlighting its strongly Eurocentric character, its blindness to structural inequalities, its smoothing out of responsibilities, and even its tendency to lapse into hubris, by fantasizing the existence of a unified

[1] Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Polity, 2022), 8; hereafter cited in the text.

human subject, supposedly capable of putting the brakes, through science, on climate disruption.[2] Yet, as Nicolás Juárez points out, "The Anthropocene proceeds through regimes of ecological violence against Black and Native American people. If that violence did not occur, there would be no Anthropocene."[3] This link between ecology and colonial violence is precisely what underpins the thinking behind *Decolonial Ecology*. The book is thus part of the same effort to reformulate the concept of the Anthropocene commonly attributed to chemist Paul Crutzen, which Ferdinand proposes to "unsettle" through a triple gesture: by adopting a plural gaze made up of "the experiences and imaginaries of the Caribbean" and able to "articulate the multiple catastrophes"; by pursuing an "ideal of equality"; and by constructing other possibilities (179–87). In place of the Anthropocene, Ferdinand coins the notion of the Negrocene: "In contrast to the Anthropocene, which is interested only in the habitations of the masters and their factories and mills, writing about the Negrocene also involves unearthing the traces of those to whom the world was denied" (61). In place of environmentalism and its "colonial ecology," he suggests exploring a "decolonial ecology," whose main characteristic is that it places the colonial fact and the critique of colonialism, slavery, and racism at the heart of the issues at stake in ecological thought (179).

Thinking the Caribbean from the Global North

Ferdinand's "double fracture" approach is quite convincing, if we accept his initial postulate of an absolute watertightness between environmental and anticolonial movements. I would like to point out a few elements that, without invalidating this theory, clearly demonstrate its situated nature.

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[2] Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'événement anthropocène: La Terre, l'histoire et nous* (Points, 2016), 253–54; Yves Citton and Jacopo Rasmi, *Générations collapsonautes: Naviguer par temps d'effondrements* (Seuil, 2020), 35–36; Alexis Metzger, *Catastrophes climatiques: 21 idées reçues pour comprendre et agir* (Cavalier Bleu, 2021), 51; Renaud Hétier, *L'humanité contre l'anthropocène: Résister aux effondrements* (PUF, 2021), 18–19; Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Découverte, 2015), 160; Christophe Bouton, *L'accélération de l'histoire: Des Lumières à l'anthropocène* (Seuil, 2022), 320.

[3] Nicolás Juárez, "The World Is Burning: Racialized Regimes of Eco-Terror and the Anthropocene as Eurocene," in Seth T. Reno, ed., *The Anthropocene: Approaches and Contexts for Literature and the Humanities* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2022), 70.

In the first place, while the incommunicability between ecology and anticolonialism is certainly well founded, at least to a large extent, with regard to currents of thought and struggles as they unfold in industrialized countries and France in particular, the antagonism is less suited to relational territories, of which the Caribbean is one of the most significant examples.[4] On the side of struggles, for example, we can cite in particular the multiplication of self-management initiatives that flourished in Puerto Rico after the devastating passage of Hurricane María in 2017, such as the Solidarity Brigade of the West (Brigada Solidaria de Oeste, or BSO), which took over the distribution of water, food, and basic necessities to the island's isolated communities, before working "with local farmers to replant their crops and create more sustainable irrigation systems."[5] The BSO's approach, like that of the many centers for mutual aid (*centros de apoyo mutuo*, or CAMs) that have developed in the same context, therefore has a dual dimension: environmental on the one hand, since it involves rethinking the Puerto Rican agricultural system as a whole, in order to move toward greater food sovereignty and reduce vulnerability to so-called natural disasters; anticolonialist and antiracist on the other, insofar as these self-managed initiatives were a conscious response to the failure of humanitarian and logistical aid from the US federal government, whose colonialist and racist relationship with Puerto Rico during and beyond this crisis has been highlighted by many observers.[6] Without necessarily being transposable as such to

[4] By "relational territory," I mean a space strongly marked by Relation, in the sense given to it by Glissant. See Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Gallimard, 1990).
[5] Marisol Lebrón and Javier Arbona, "Resisting Debt and Colonial Disaster in Post-Maria Puerto Rico," *The Funambulist: Politics of Space and Bodies*, no. 16 (9 March 2018), thefunambulist.net/magazine/16-proletarian-fortresses/guest-columnists, para. 11.
[6] A significant example of a CAM is CAMJiLares, a self-managed community and agricultural project that is involved in reclaiming territory, defending Indigenous and peasant identity, passing on ancestral agrarian knowledge, and defending food sovereignty. For critiques of the US federal response, see, among others, Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (Haymarket, 2018); Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús and Michael Ralph, eds., "Introduction: Hurricane María and the Caribbean," *Transforming Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 99–101; Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol Lebrón, eds., *Las réplicas del desastre: Puerto Rico antes y después del huracán María* (2019; repr., Haymarket, 2021); and Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Duke University Press, 2021).

other contexts, these few examples of struggles show that the divorce between the ecological struggle and the fight against inequality is far from being consummated in a uniform and universal way. Ferdinand also points this out, praising certain Caribbean environmental movements such as Assaupamar in Martinique, Casa Pueblo in Puerto Rico, the Peasant Movement of Papaye in Haiti, the struggles of the Saramaka people in Suriname, and Francia Márquez's Afro-Colombian feminist and environmental movement (22).

In terms of currents of thought, the antagonism between environmentalism and anticolonialism also seems less obvious to me once we leave the Western sphere. While Ferdinand acknowledges a debt to Latin American decolonial thinking and to Africana philosophy (14), certain currents of thought in Latin America, such as Indigenous community feminisms and their concept of body-territory, or decolonial feminisms and their notion of the coloniality of gender, which enable us to better understand the articulation between race, gender, and territory in the processes of colonization, could be more present in the analysis.[7] However, as in the case of the struggles, the existence of currents of thought that articulate ecology and anticolonialism in territories of the Global South does not signal a flaw in the system presented by *Decolonial Ecology*, quite the contrary: What is being described is not so much a reality that would be universally shared but a state of affairs observable in the philosophies and struggles of the North, and in France in particular. Despite a certain dualism, the "colonial and environmental double fracture" has the merit of inviting French readers, first and foremost, to decentralize and take a detour into territories where the impact and legacy of colonialism are such that the alternative between environmentalism and anticolonialism no longer holds sway.

[7] Lorena Cabnal, "Acercamiento a la construcción del pensamiento epistémico de las mujeres indígenas feministas comunitarias de Abya Yala," in ACSUR–Las Segovias, *Feminismos diversos: El feminismo comunitario*; María Lugones, "Colonialidad y género," *Tabula Rasa* 9 (July–December 2008): 73–101.

Dichotomous Thinking and Decentering

Generally speaking, *Decolonial Ecology* is an effort to shift the focus of modern Western thought, which is based on hierarchical dichotomies. This is evidenced by the long series of antagonisms, detectable through a system of oppositions perceptible even in the language, designed to signal the aporia of each of the two possibilities and the need to envisage a third way. Ferdinand's book is saturated with prepositional phrases or adverbs such as "in contrast to" and "conversely," as well as binary expressions like "on the one hand . . . on the other," "either . . . or" and "neither . . . nor"; it is also peppered with numerous images and metaphors—I'll come back to this later—also built around a dual conception, the most significant example of which is undoubtedly that of Noah's ark and the slave ship: "If the slave ship and Noah's ark represent *two different scenes* and *two different kinds of politics* (debarkation/boarding), the wanderings they engender correspond to each other like *two sides of the same coin*. With *two opposing paths*, the slave ship and Noah's ark stage a scene of deculturation, of being alienated from the relationship to the Earth, and a loss of the world" (194; italics mine). Of course, this dual articulation allows us to account for the dichotomous thinking characteristic of modernity, which, as we know, is broken down into numerous hierarchical oppositions—male/female, Black/White, human/nonhuman, North/South, body/reason, and so on.[8] Without this structural dichotomy, it seems impossible to think of our world and, consequently, to conceive of an alternative, which materializes, in Ferdinand's essay, in the metaphor of the world-ship: "I suggest we conceive of ecological thinking neither as a Noah's Ark nor as a slave ship but in terms of a world-ship whose horizon is the encounter with the other" (21). It is therefore a kind of obligatory passageway for formulating a critique of each of the two antagonistic poles and, in so doing, managing to decentralize the gaze and envisage other

[8] The centrality of the body is one of the key points of Ferdinand's analysis (204–13).

possibilities. At the same time, however, this dualism tends to homogenize certain situations, at the risk of rendering invisible parts of the world that already resist this form of dialectical thinking inherited from modern philosophy. Here, I would like to highlight a few of the most significant.

The first of these concerns the human/nonhuman dichotomy. In an effort to deconstruct the opposition between "human" and "environment"—an effort that is also necessary if we are to successfully complete the project of shifting the Anthropocene—Ferdinand writes, "Simply listing, one after another, the different 'environmental impacts' of the Plantation would hold us inside modernity's double fracture. The destruction that has been caused would be taken as very 'environmental' against a very 'human' socio-political background. In order to heal this double fracture the *relations* formed by these destructions have to be identified, relations that bind together the humans (the colonists, the enslaved, and indigenous peoples) with non-humans" (38; italics in original). Further on, he points out that "the colonial enslaved person is also kept in an alien relationship to the world. Hold politics represents this line that is drawn between human beings and denies some the same qualities as others, that excludes some from the dignity of an existence where a scene, an Earth, a world are shared" (52). But this line of partition between humans, as pointed out by Ferdinand, presupposes a generalization of the human condition to all subjects brought into contact by colonization—not only colonists, enslaved, and Indigenous peoples but also men and women. However, Latin American and Caribbean decolonial feminism tells us the opposite. For the Argentine philosopher María Lugones, for example, "Europeans were human beings, the colonized were not. Those they called 'Indians' and 'Blacks' were then conceived as beasts, natural beings, and treated as such in modern Western thought. Nature was conceived as an instrument for the benefit of beings of reason. All of nature was and still is conceived as an instrument of human man (a tautology) for himself, to accumulate wealth infinitely,

extracted from all that is natural."[9] As Lugones demonstrates, the colonial system constructed Blacks and Indigenous people as mere natural resources in the colonial system, "genderless beings . . . sexually dimorphic and ambiguous, sexually aberrant and uncontrolled."[10] This explains not only the commodification and sexual exploitation of bodies during the colonial era, from which the metaphor of "ebony wood" referring to Black Africans during the slave trade derives, as Ferdinand rightly reminds us (59), but also the processes of animalization and genitalization of Black people that continue to this day, as Frantz Fanon has shown, and the double marginalization of Indigenous women—in feminist and decolonial movements.[11] The modern hierarchical opposition between "human" and "environment" that Ferdinand proposes to rethink is based on the assumption that White settlers, Black slaves, and the Americas' First Peoples share the same human condition, even if some of them are "*off of* a common scene, *off of* an Earth and a common world" (52; italics in original). However, it is not that some people are excluded from the world but rather that they were excluded from the very notion of humanity. In my view, rethinking the hierarchical dichotomy between "human" and "environment" requires us to reconsider, both synchronically and diachronically, our own conception of what it means to be human.

The second point I would like to address concerns the centrality of the figure of the Black slave in *Decolonial Ecology*. Far from calling into question the importance of the slave trade and triangular commerce—which is obviously beyond doubt—in the construction of the world order we are heirs to today, I would like to discuss here the category of "Negro" as used by Ferdinand in his

[9] "Los europeos eran seres humanos, los colonizados no. A los que llamaron 'indios' y 'negros' fueron entonces concebidos como bestias, seres naturales, y tratados como tal en el pensamiento occidental moderno. La naturaleza fue concebida como instrumento para el beneficio de los seres de razón. Toda la naturaleza estaba y sigue estando concebida como instrumento del hombre humano (una tautología) para sí, para acumular riqueza infinitamente, extraída de todo lo natural."; María Lugones, "Subjetividad esclava, colonialidad de género, marginalidad y opresiones múltiples," *Globalización*, May 2013, rcci.net/globalizacion/2013/fg1576.htm, para. 5.
[10] "seres sin género . . . sexualmente dimórficos o ambiguos, sexualmente aberrantes y sin control"; Lugones, "Subjetividad esclava," para. 7.
[11] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Seuil, 1952).

essay, that is, not as a marker of origin or skin color but as a sign of human exploitation. Indeed, in Ferdinand's vocabulary, the Negro is one who does not inhabit the world, one who is excluded from it in favor of a master of whom he is a slave: "Just as the Negro is not reducible to a Black person, anyone can find that they are in the modern world's hold" (185). So there are "Negroes of yesterday and today" (61), far beyond the history of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery. The term therefore designates a mode of relationship between human beings, on the one hand, and between human beings and their environment, on the other, a mode of relationship that characterizes colonial inhabitation and gives rise to the concept of the Negrocene, in place of the Anthropocene: "In addition to its socio-political dimensions, colonial slavery denotes a way of inhabiting the Earth, of using its resources, and of relating to non-humans. I call this the Negrocene" (58). From this point of view, the category of Negro seems quite useful and justified. However, I see a risk in its generalization: even if it is explicitly stated that the use of the term aims to go beyond its connotation, the latter cannot be totally disregarded, as it refers, in the collective imagination, to a particular citational chain.[12] Thus, the all-encompassing notion of the Negro, as well as the powerful network of metaphors spun around the slave trade—the slave ship, the politics of the hold, marronage, and the like—which permeates and structures the book as a whole, tends to push into the background, behind the figure of the Black slave, other forms of subjection that nonetheless occupied a crucial place in the development of colonial inhabitation. It is significant in this respect that the treatment of the First Peoples in *Decolonial Ecology* is approached from the angle of extinction: There is talk of "genocide," "disappearance of these peoples," and epidemics that "wiped out the populations of the New World," a set of terms that act, on a discursive level, to erase these peoples and relegate them to a historical background (40, 227). Of course, there is no

[12] I use the expression "citational chain" in its performative sense, as Judith Butler understands it about the term "queer." See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), 281.

questioning the massacre of the Amerindians or their vulnerability to the diseases brought by the colonists, but the fact remains that this erasure is part of a narrative that is controversial today, even in the Caribbean territories reputed to have no Indigenous population left. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example, Sherina Feliciano-Santos has shown that "discourses of Taíno extinction often rely on governmental and disciplinary interventions to silence, erase, and trivialize alternative interpretations and understandings of Puerto Rican historical trajectories," even though these discourses are often based on dubious scientific arguments.[13] From this point of view, I feel that the category of Negro has the disadvantage of perpetuating the erasure of the First Peoples in the discourse, even if its dissociation from the sole figure of the Black slave is clearly explained by Ferdinand. Insofar as this problematic relates above all to the performative dimension of discourse, I obviously I mean not to cast doubt on the author's intention at the time he conceived this notion but rather to envisage a possible epistemic risk in its circulation—although this risk is in no way the sole responsibility of the author.

An Aesthetic Gesture

I would like to close this discussion with one of the aspects that I feel constitutes one of the strengths of *Decolonial Ecology*, although not necessarily the most commented upon or the most obvious. As a philologist, I am sensitive not only to discourses (the signified) but also to the forms these discourses (the signifier) take. As I mentioned above in connection with the extinction narrative, the terms used produce bundles of meaning that are sometimes beyond the author's control; yet, as Judith Butler asserts, assuming this risk is at the same time a "political promise,"

[13] Sherina Feliciano-Santos, *A Contested Caribbean Indigeneity: Language, Social Practice, and Identity Within Puerto Rican Taíno Activism* (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 19. See Rima Brusi Gil de Lamadrid and Isar Godreau, "¿Somos indígenas?," *Diálogo*, March–April 2007, 10-11; and Gabriel Haslip-Viera, ed., *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics* (1999; repr., Markus Wiener, 2001).

and this, for me, is the power of Ferdinand's work and its metaphorical networks.[14] This power is based above all on a clear awareness of the political importance of the aesthetic gesture, palpable in the book at both discursive and structural levels. On the discursive level, in fact, Ferdinand explicitly stresses the need, in the face of catastrophe, to "hold together, within the same narrative, the arts, literature, and the sciences, the pursuit of human dignity and equality as well as rights for non-humans to persevere in their being" (232). Far from establishing a hierarchy between art and science, or between literature and theory, the book recognizes that a decolonial ecology also requires the deconstruction of another binarism, this time epistemological, and demands that equal place be given to other "ways of writing about the world," to "a form of literature and cinematic art that is capable of bridging this double fracture" (128). In *Decolonial Ecology*, this translates into three fundamental elements, which I will examine in turn.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the analysis draws on numerous examples from the arts and literature, treated on an equal footing with other areas of knowledge. Again, this is a point that Ferdinand explicitly assumes, declaring in particular that the Anthropocene narrative and its "colonial oikos" are perceptible both "in many of the speeches of international institutions, in performances, in the media, in the arts, and in cultural productions" (124). The arts and literature thus provide the raw material for analysis, which is at no point deemed less serious than other types of sources. Among the works cited in *Decolonial Ecology* are references to American blockbusters, postcolonial literature, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Joseph Conrad's short story "Typhoon," and Greek mythology, to Turner's painting, and to various authors from the French Caribbean, including Maryse Condé and Louis-Philippe Dalembert, although it is regrettable that works from other Caribbean spheres are not more frequently mentioned.[15] This recognition of the

[14] See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), 8–16, 161.
[15] Caribbean science fiction has grown considerably in the twenty-first century, particularly in the Spanish Caribbean, and its vigor is reflected in the publication of numerous anthologies. See, among others, Yoss, Melanie Pérez Ortiz,

intrinsic value of representations, as a form of theory in their own right, is reflected structurally in the deliberate choice to begin each chapter with a painting of an actual slave ship, accompanied by a short paragraph telling its story with the freedom of prose, so as to "give a literary sensibility to the displacement that is required for thinking from the world's hold" (22). In this sense, Ferdinand's essay confirms the words of Rosamond S. King, for whom "the ideas raised both in the literature and in literary criticism can be useful in the consideration of lived realities and in deconstructing social and cultural mores and hierarchies."[16]

The second fundamental point, which is also the counterpart of the first, consists in the meticulous inclusion of social imaginaries in the analysis. Thus, fantasies and representations are given equal importance in understanding the mechanisms that underpin a certain conception of the world, in the same way as artistic works—which are nourished by social imaginaries—and elements traditionally considered "factual." These include, for example, imaginaries that construct the Caribbean as a paradise, or marronage as an exclusively male phenomenon, both of which produce real material effects.[17] More generally, Ferdinand frequently adopts the vocabulary of representations, speaking, for example, repeatedly of "representation," "imaginary," or "scene" to describe particular worldviews (78–81).

But the most salient element, in my view, is that *Decolonial Ecology* presents, in itself, a form of writing at the frontier of theory and literature. As I have already pointed out, the book abounds in numerous tropes, some of which are recurrent, such as the image of the ship, but also,

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Odilius Vlak, and Rafael Acevedo, comps., *Confederación eléctrica antillana: Antología de ciencia ficción caribeña* (Elefanta, 2024); Eïrïc R. Durandal Stormcrow, comp., *Fricción cuántica: Antología de ciencia ficción desde Puerto Rico y su diáspora* (Gnomo, 2022); and Raúl Aguiar, comp., *Ciberficción: Cuentos cubanos de ciencia ficción* (Ruth, 2016).

[16] Rosamond S. King, *Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean* (University Press of Florida, 2014), 13.

[17] The fantasy of the Caribbean as a paradise, for example, has the concrete effect of constructing this space as "the laboratory where everything is permitted and morally admissible, unlike in the metropolitan center," with all the consequences this implies in terms of resource exploitation, pollution, enslavement of populations, and so on (Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 203).

more broadly, the oceanic metaphor, which is particularly suited to the relational thinking Ferdinand implements: shipwrecked persons, ports, storms, capes, swells, and colonial hurricanes are thus deployed in a metaphoric prose that is embodied in character-types parading in a wide gallery of portraits—xeno-warrior, master-patriarch, sacrificer, world devourer, Maroon, avenger, or kamikaze—and together conforming the project of "a Mother-Earth populated by human and non-human alliances, true shipmates of the same world-ship, standing upon the bridge of justice" (203). This metaphoric style, assumed from the very beginning of the work, dilutes the boundaries between disciplines and fields of knowledge. Far from being merely a circumstantial aspect of the text, it seems to me on the contrary to constitute one of its foundations. It is through this aesthetic gesture, among others, that *Decolonial Ecology* works to undermine the obsessive rationalism of modern Western thought from within, and to envisage other horizons for a plural construction of knowledge.

Preferred citation:

Sophie Large, "Decolonial Ecology by Malcom Ferdinand: Epistemic and Aesthetic Decenterings," trans. Sophie Large, http://smallaxe.net/ https://smallaxe.net/sites/default/files/2026-01/Large_English_Translation.pdf; originally published as "Une écologie décoloniale de Malcom Ferdinand : décentrements épistémiques et esthétiques," *Small Axe*, no. 78 (November 2025): 144-63. If citing a quote, the page number should be placed after the URL, separated by a comma.