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Boreal ecopoetics: Christian Dotremont's site-specific writing in Sápmi

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Abstract

Northern Fennoscandia entered Christian Dotremont's (1922–1979) imagination in 1956. The Belgian avant-gardist was comfortable in Central-European artistic milieus through his involvement in CoBrA (1948–1951), but a total of 12 journeys to Sápmi between 1956 and 1978 had a profound effect on his creative work, especially the logograms he is best known for. This article studies Dotremont's travel writings and logograms as site-specific forms of writing, which can be seen as precursors to eco-poetic approaches. Dotremont's journeys took place at a cultural turning point, when ethnographers had made their field trips but mass tourism was still in its embryonic state in Sápmi. His Sápmi-inspired travel writings reveal how the idealism related to a hyperborean north initially intrigued him while he sought to elude modernity. Dotremont's cultural exchanges in Sápmi were non-artistic but manifested in his art and writing. Sápmi brought about an ecological awakening through awe that was not sublimated but a lived experience. Dotremont immersed himself in Sápmi, with fundamental repercussions to his creative exploits.

KEYWORDS
avant-garde, Christian Dotremont, ecopoetics, logogram, Sámi, visual poetry

> In snow, all tracks/—animal and human—/speak to one another,//a long conversation that keeps breaking off/then starting up again//I want to read those pages/instead of the kind/made of human words.//I want to write in the language of those/who have been to that place before me.
>
> — Chase Twichell, 'Animal Languages', in *The Snow Watcher*

> Il a réussi, mieux que n'importe qui avant lui, à mettre en relation la neige et la blancheur du papier. Dans la neige, on voit très bien comment le trajet peut devenir une écriture[.] L'écriture déviant le trajet de notre existence même, la trace même du passage de quelqu'un.
>
> — Michel Butor, *Dotremont et ses écrivures*[1]

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sápmi is a region of northern Fennoscandia inhabited by the European indigenous Sámi people, partially over-lapping Nordic Lapland.[2] In the 2020s, the area faces conflicting interests from the Sámi, international mining companies and environmental activists. The pressure for change in Sápmi through modernisation was already present in the travel writings of the Belgian avant-garde writer and artist Christian Dotremont (1922–1979). His writings set in Sápmi are located between ethnographers' field trips in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the rise of mass tourism from its embryonic stage in the 1980s. Sápmi enabled Dotremont's poetics of writing, as evidenced by his logograms, or word-drawings. The logograms and lyrical travel narratives document Sápmi's nature, the indigenous people, cultural fragmentation and man's relationship with nature in an urbanising environment.

Dotremont's first trip to northern Fennoscandia in 1956 rooted him in what he called the 'interstice be-tween nature and art' (Dotremont, 1998, 296). In this article, I argue that the artist's characterisation should not be read as a mere metaphor but as the foundation of his writing.[3] The liminal space, or 'interstice', between ecology and aesthetics became central to Dotremont's creative activity. It manifested itself in the site-specific character of writing—presenting an inalienable connection to place, rootedness in place or being evoked by places.[4] In these senses, site-specific writing is conceptually related to site-specific art, which, in its mode of execution, takes into account the history, temporality, practices and users of places.[5] What these site-specificities have in common is the localisation of the material dimension of creative activity, in other words, the connection to an actual locality.

Dotremont's writings are site-specific in the frame of the Sápmi landscape. He writes that the 'landscape of the North is not a spectacle, but a stage on which a spectacle is sketched out, a throat where a voice lights up' (Dotremont, 1985, 38). Accordingly, this site-specificity is primarily expressed in the logograms Dotremont exe-cuted on paper and on snow and ice in Sápmi. Developed in 1962, logograms were spurts of expressive handwrit-ing in which the 'immediacy' of the body producing the writing highlighted the unique author (see Figure 2). In the 1960s, Dotremont wrote against the contemporary post-structuralist theory, which emphasised the death of the author, the unattainable origin of writing and the omnipresence of the text. Instead of relying on the interchange-ability of words in a language system, Dotremont experimented with the performativity of writing, which made each writing event unique and inextricably linked to its source, the creative body.[6] For Dotremont, the writing body was temporal and local, so that embodiment reflected writing as an event—in other words, its connection to a specific place and a unique moment of execution.

The site-specific nature of Dotremont's texts reflects the 'beyond human' living world of which the human being is fundamentally a part. In this sense, his poetics is an early representative of ecopoetics, which seeks to map places rather than styles of writing (Skinner, 2009). Despite this fundamental connection, Dotremont's travel writing and poetics have yet to be discussed from the perspectives of site-specificity and ecological conscious-ness. A potential reason is that these features are not often associated with text-based avant-garde, although

in Dotremont's case they are the very features rendering his work avant-garde in the aesthetic and theoretical framework of the 1960s. Namely, logograms combine both the attempt to express the artist's 'authentic' experience in the avant-garde of the early twentieth century—especially in surrealism, where Dotremont's literary roots lie—and the aestheticisation of indigenous peoples and their art (consider, for instance, the influence of African art on dada and beyond).[7] Moreover, logograms maintained a particular affinity with the writing experiments of Dotremont's contemporaries, such as Henri Michaux and the lettrists, all of whom sought to express the author's authentic experience as precisely as possible via expressive and idiosyncratic writing. Unlike them, however, Dotremont steered clear of so-called asemic writing, that is, signs developed by the artist.

In this article, I investigate to what extent site-specificity applies to writing and how fundamentally the paradigm of ecopoetics, the practices of writing and the context of recent aspects of decolonisation can be applied to Dotremont's texts on Sápmi. I also explore how these perspectives shed light on his position as someone experiencing Sápmi and its unique landscapes, cultures and inhabitants. The writings present an outsider's gaze through which Dotremont reiterated the dominant approaches of his time. The first part of the article contextualises the place—that is, Sápmi, its inhabitants, nature, phenomena and their representation in Dotremont's work. The second part delves into the idea of and practices related to site, including the poetics and site-specificity of his logograms.

2 | FORMATIVE AVANT-GARDE INTERPOLATIONS

The groundwork for Dotremont's interest in Sápmi and his logogrammatic poetics was laid in the late 1930s and 1940s. His activities in the avant-garde movements during and after the Second World War were formative for the development of various word-drawings.[8] In the avant-garde frame, Dotremont is best known as a founding member of CoBrA (1948–1951), an art movement emphasising spontaneous creation.[9] Adherents to CoBrA used popular art in their work, including drawings of animals by children and folk artists, with the group maintaining that such art represented a grass-roots cultural universalism. Essential to Dotremont's site-specific writing was CoBrA's interest in stylistic naivism and indigenous art, as these influences would later be echoed in logograms. Equally important for the evolution of logograms was how the movement pioneered word-paintings and word-drawings in a manner that dissolved any categorical distinction between painting and writing.

Elements of budding ecological consciousness can be seen in the CoBrA artists' idea of the so-called 'human animal', which challenged the categorical anthropocentric distinction between humans and other species (see Jorn, 1988). Instead of a serious critique of anthropocentrism, it was an avant-gardist and playful representation of the animal instincts and desires found in humans. The human animal thus created a unifying relationship between humans, other species and the natural environment that we all inhabit.[10]

Dotremont's early perceptions about Sápmi were based on experiences of people involved in CoBrA. In 1957, he recalled two of his Danish fellows' voyage to Northern Fennoscandia in the 1940s:

> On the busiest days of Cobra, seven years ago, Else [Alfelt] and Carl-Henning [Pedersen] told me about one of their trips. The first pictures I saw were Else's paintings. I have not read anything about their [the Sámi] lives that was not aimed at tourists, or nonsense (igloos) or statistics, nothing about their origins, for example.
>
> (Dotremont, 1998, 302)

Dotremont refers to Alfelt's works, which depict Sápmi in colourful abstractions and lush watercolours. Like Dotremont's early travel writings, they exhibit a borealistic interest in Sápmi. Borealism signifies an interest based on an exoticising and Eurocentric discourse of Nordicness, which was also visible in the budding 1940s tourism in Sápmi—like the igloos described above.[11] Dotremont's logogrammatic writing, however, neglected the touristic fabulation

related to the North, such as the aforementioned igloos, and emerged from the interstice where the writer negotiated with the environment in order to explore his (pre)linguistic relation to it.

3 | DOTREMONT AS A PRECURSOR OF ECOPOETICS

Place, and the ecology of place in particular, plays a key role in ecopoetics. Ecopoetics allows for the examination of the site-specificity of Dotremont's writing 'beyond' language's system of meaning because it focuses on the preconditions of textual creation. The approach emphasises the living world beyond the text, to which it considers language being able to refer. The task of ecopoetics has been summarised as the preservation of other species' poetics, including their autopoietic processes, through words (Gilcrest, 2002, 12; Lummaa, 2010, 114–115; Rigby, 2016, 79).[12] In Dotremont's case, ecopoetics emphasises the relation between writing and place, which emerges as site-specificity.

Place and its particularity are important in the poem 'Paljon lunta' (Plenty of Snow), which describes how 'New [snow] is packing up/Ivalo is already without a floor/and a roof' (Dotremont, 1985, 103).[13] This fragment has little connection with the cultural-critical avant-garde of the time: Ivalo was a small town, far from the metropolis that was usually regarded as the scene of the avant-garde. Also, considering the stylistic elements, enjambment and omission of punctuation were already tried and tested techniques of post-Mallarméan writing in the 1960s. In other words, they were hardly avant-garde in the proper progressive sense of the term.

The most significant contribution is the reference to Ivalo, which suggests that here writing reproduces an experience of place—Dotremont seems to have believed that such an experience can be captured through language. Furthermore, the poem is notably spatial: the sheltered character of the place disappears, and with snowfall its boundaries open towards the infinity of the sky as the earth gradually disappears from view. The reader will notice that this scaling towards infinity is also expressed through a blurring of location, as any northern locale could replace Ivalo—were it not for the attempt to reproduce the author's authentic and unique experience. Hence, the place name holds an evidential value. Similar visionary experiences linked to Sápmi and its regional phenomena were a recurring motif in Dotremont's travel texts, and their progressive character is reflected in the logogrammatic writing technique, which is discussed in more detail below.[14]

The contemporary ecopoetic lens enables an unearthing of Dotremont's method of writing, where linguistic and pre-linguistic processes negotiate with the environment. Ecopoetics appeared in the early 2000s, and its variegated field has some family resemblances. According to a concise definition, ecopoetics is biocentric (all living things have an objective purpose), it is not anthropocentric (moral rights do not only apply to humans), it is environmentally ethical (it is based on the principles of environmental ethics), and it presupposes an understanding that our natural environment is composed of dynamic processes (nature is not static) (Berdinesen, 2018). Despite the temporal distance, ecopoetics can be seen as paralleling the political ambition of avant-garde (in Dotremont's era) in that both are future-orientated, share a desire to create something new, and maintain a critique of the prevailing forms of society and hierarchical ways of thinking. From the avant-garde, the ecopoetic approach requires renunciation of anthropocentrism, and in the light of his work, Dotremont seems to have anticipated such a demand. For him, however, rejecting anthropocentrism meant escaping the artifice of urban and industrialised society.

The avant-garde is often rather unilaterally associated with the urban milieu, although ecological awareness in the avant-garde is particularly evident in the second half of the twentieth century, when Dotremont's logograms surfaced.[15] For Continental avant-gardists like Dotremont, the problem with ecopoetics would be its Anglo-American focus and narrow historical awareness. Ecopoeticists were, therefore, not necessarily experts on the European avant-garde. Early ecopoetics mainly criticised late twentieth-century Anglo-American experimental literature (including the New York School and the Language poets) for its lack of a relationship with nature while ignoring not only other linguistic and cultural spheres but also the political-historical dimension of experimental

writing in the avant-garde. So, what should be done with Dotremont? As an experimentalist, he writes: 'Very spontaneous, writing is like geography: at once real and imaginary, in the same space, about nature and our nature, at the same time, from the same unique source' (letter to Johan van Cauwenberge, 1976, quoted in Walecka-Garbalinska, 2015, 49). It is worth recalling Dotremont's characterisation of being 'stuck' in the liminal space between nature and art, which arguably evokes a basic ecopoetic setting rather than a metaphor.

Dotremont can rightly be described as a *proto-ecopoetic* writer because his texts contain elements of environmental specificity that were not considered at the time of publication and have since been foregrounded by ecopoetics. For example, in his travelogue 'Pour Sevettijärvi' (To Sevettijärvi, 1963), he writes:

> At Sevettijärvi, I leave all the roads, only a snowy wilderness ahead, where I meet the last dog and the first reindeer, then the first wolverine, then the first wolf. Almost always the same thing. And these four layers also form a bed, a cupboard, a sledge, for man and against man. The dog is the wolf's word, the reindeer is the wolf's bed, the wolverine is the wolf's fur. Sevettijärvi, that it is, the emptiness that conceals the whole, and the emptiness that allows the blurred whole, and these two wholes meet there and even interchange, crumple; I lie down between them on my plank, in the sting of the cold, under the protection of my Sámi turban and woollen sweater.
>
> (Dotremont, 1985, 75)

The journey's harshness is explained by the local reality: the journey to Sevettijärvi required a 70 kilometre journey in a sleigh or a snowcat operated by the Finnish Post, often in freezing temperatures, as the road from Kaamanen was not built until the late 1960s. Rejecting documentary precision, the former surrealist associates freely with the interchangeability of other species, objects and language. It is not a case of mere interchangeability of words but of the correspondences created between sign systems in the liminal space between nature and art. The ecopoetics of the text is also characterised by how the author's descriptive grip on the animal others seems to slip. The dog, reindeer, wolverine and wolf Dotremont encounters resist being represented, that is, being reduced from unique individuals to verbal symbols. The written metamorphoses of other species precisely maintain their untamed nature within language, drawing the reader's attention to the human need to 'tame' the world through language.[16]

From an ecopoetic point of view, the lyrical 'Pour Sevettijärvi' contains biocentric and anti-anthropocentric formulations and interweavings of natural and imaginative processes. Dotremont presents an environmental ethic through unperturbedness, a kind of 'leaving things be', by assuming an observer's position instead of directly responding to a moral imperative. In his texts and works of art, he is seldom involved in moulding the environment or directly interacting with other species.

Dotremont's site-specific writing and proto-ecopoetics also contain topological, entropological and ethnological perspectives on text and place in their ecopoetic context (Skinner, 2009). The topological perspective emphasises the relations of places to their history. For Dotremont, there is always a living world behind the text, and this idea unites his travel writing. The entropological perspective, for one, refers to the permanence of social systems and their tendency eventually to disintegrate. The Belgian writer represents the Sámi social networks in a way that reveals their inherent vulnerability in a modernising world. He discusses the arrival of the modern and urban way of life in Sápmi by stating, for instance, that there is a 'beastly buzz of bulldozers everywhere' (Dotremont, 1985, 120). Alongside urbanisation, an ethnological perspective covers non-urban landscapes and their interrelationships. Dotremont depicts, draws and maps Sápmi landscapes (see Figure 4). He also compares the environments regionally (Sápmi compared to southern Lapland), nationally (Sápmi compared to southern Finland or southern Sweden) and internationally (Sápmi compared to countries he is familiar with, such as Denmark or Belgium). Site-specificity implies the marking of place through demarcation. Dotremont constantly made a tacit comparison between regions, for he feared that Sápmi would become identical to other places and therefore lose the particular character he had assigned to northernmost Fennoscandia.

4 | NORTHERN LANDSCAPES BRIMMING WITH WRITING

Dotremont had various reasons to travel northwards. He wanted to distance himself from the influence of artistic centres (the avant-garde metropolis). Also, his physical condition mandated a change of scenery (Veivo, 2009, 86). He was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1951 and headed for Sápmi five years later, partly to relieve his symptoms and partly to pursue his interest in indigenous cultures. The journeys to northern Fennoscandia began ritualistically, almost always starting in Copenhagen and often in the spring–winter months between March and May. Once there, he characterised his experience as one of unfamiliarity and strangeness.

Dotremont regarded Sápmi as a northern utopia, an attitude inherited from pre-modern times which exemplifies borealism.[17] For example, he defined Sápmi as an 'infinitely distant' place where modernisation was yet to take root (Dotremont, 1998, 499). The attitude expressed in his travel writings was Eurocentric, which exoticised Sápmi nature and Sámi culture. From a contemporary perspective, Dotremont can be criticised for failing to acquire factual knowledge of the Sámi community to support his writings. Lack of a common language limited his contacts with the locals, and thus the Sámi primarily had little agency in the travel narratives.[18] Hence, the heterogeneity and internal differences of the community remained unrecognised. Nor did Dotremont know Sámi languages, oral traditions or their particular narrative conventions.[19] His travel narratives were not based on a factual historical knowledge of the Sámi past. For example, in the text 'Auberge I' (Inn I)—discussed in more detail below—he developed a fictional history of the Sámi from his own modernism-critical standpoint. This is why the processes of (de) colonisation are partially overlooked in Dotremont's travel writings.[20] Nevertheless, Dotremont explicitly showed consideration whenever he knew Sámi predilections: '"Sámi?"— "Yes." He is surprised that I know the word that the Sámi prefer being used (it is inappropriate to call them Laplanders)' (Dotremont, 1985, 28).[21] Indeed, based on the testimony of his writings, his contacts with locals seem mutually friendly but distant.

Despite their shortcomings, the travelogues have documentary merit and cultural-historical value. In his texts on Sápmi, Dotremont observes nature, landscapes and other species—establishing connections between what he sees and the elements of writing (see Figure 4). In addition, he was interested in the geology and weather conditions of Sápmi, which added a particular regional specificity to the texts. In Dotremont's writings, the actual observation of the environment merges with the imaginary north, not forgetting the experiential 'immersion' at the boundaries of sensory experience, as exemplified in the overlapping realities in 'Pour Sevettijärvi'.

In the travel writings and letters describing Sápmi, there are diverse connections to the local nature, which in part reflect the boundaries of nature and art. The documentary and affective dimensions of these texts are linked with depictions of the environment and nature (dealing with themes such as emptiness, distances or mythicism). Dotremont notes that:

> [the] silence of [Sápmi] is exceptional. The power of words is all the more important, there is emptiness; the absolute emptiness of nature, of the white. The visual language of nature is crucial, in nature there are small manifestations of signs in the distance. Here you feel isolated from the world, here people are happy.
>
> (Dotremont, 1981b, n.p.)

In Sápmi, he sees writing outlined against white snow: the analogy of snow and white paper is automatised, which suggests an aesthetic underpinning his experience. The quote's closing sentence is in a different register, where Dotremont assigns himself an observer's position, interprets his surroundings and expresses it affectively.

The Belgian traveller's experience of foreignness was related to nature, culture, language, social relations and solitude. For example, the sky 'is an integral part of the frightening and restful solitude. Inside the inn, loneliness tricks, arranges, arranges the night' (Dotremont, 1998, 294). Nature is linked to personal experience, which has a social dimension. One of the features of the journey is the lack of encounters ('deceptive solitude'). The inn

is filled with people, who, for lack of a common language, do not communicate verbally with each other, even though they share a space—they are connected in and by place. In addition to these features, the lyricism of the text is accentuated by a certain lexical strangeness, as Dotremont did not always have names for the things he encountered. 'From the little wood that protects me, where the table, shelf, bed are wrinkles in the wall', the clever reader discerns a *goahti*, a Sámi hut (Dotremont, 1985, 113). Similarly, the 'Sámi turban' in 'Pour Sevettijärvi' refers to a *sávká*, which Dotremont names after an object that is more familiar to him but equally exoticised. Due to his lexical shortcomings, the connotation of a turban should not be regarded as pejorative even though it highlights his unfamiliarity with the objects surrounding him.

5 | A BELGIAN AMONG THE SÁMI

Dotremont's travelogues depict a will to interact with the Sámi. Yet, the people he encounters remain generally distant: in the absence of a shared language, they remain anonymous, and communication happens in rudimentary gestures. Although the encounters never occur on anyone's terms, the gaze is always Dotremont's, that of the outside observer acutely aware of his position. His assumptions that individuals are Sámi are based on some features of spoken language and from external characteristics, such as clothing. The pitfall of this approach is that even though recognising the Sámi as distinct from Finns, it creates stereotypes of them, since cultural belonging in its various manifestations is a political and individual matter. Any critical discussion is absent from the travel writings.

Dotremont's first drawing of the Sámi already thematises his gaze (see Figure 1). The drawing depicts two abstracted figures in *gákti* and *sávka*, a Sámi outfit and headgear. Also pictured are the tapered-headed *nutukas* (Sámi boots). The costumes are so conspicuous that the figures wearing them appear as mere vertical skeletons supporting the garments. Such association of Sámi identity with external characteristics is problematic. Especially from a contemporary perspective, Sámi clothing is one of the key objects of decolonisation processes.[22] Descriptions of Sámi attire are equally problematic, with Dotremont likening Sámi costumes to a 'child's drawing'. However, the characterisation should be understood in the context of CoBrA, that is, as a

FIGURE 1 Dotremont's early drawing of the Sámi from 1962 (Walecka-Garbalinska, 2015, 52). Christian Dotremont, 1962, inv. CDDO 00708/1962/001, Coll. Fondation Roi Baudouin, on deposit at the AML, Brussels.

source of appreciation. After all, CoBrA artists were influenced by the art of indigenous peoples. Dotremont calls himself a boor for not having equally colourful clothing, but the characterisation still exoticises the Sámi dress (Dotremont, 1985, 47–48).

On the reverse of Dotremont's drawing, it reads 'one of the earliest Sápmi drawings' ('Un des premiers dessins lapons') (see Walecka-Garbalinska, 2015, 52).[23] Without the context-revealing paratext, placing the work in a Sámi cultural context might not be possible. Due to the drawing technique, both figures resemble calligraphic expressions, emphasising the characters' likeness to written signs. This was straightforward and intentional, as Dotremont saw writing everywhere, or at least the works could be associated with the literary-visual borderland he developed.

The Sámi appear as a matter of course throughout the travel writings. The text-sketch 'Auberge I' (Inn I, 1957), which Dotremont wrote after his first trip to Sápmi, is the most extensive treatment of the people, containing anthropological elements. Here, Dotremont presents a fictitious history of the Sámi, although he admits to his background knowledge being incomplete. Dotremont writes:

> The Sámi... I wondered if they were fleeing, if they were fleeing the huge melting waves because they were used to living in the cold, with and against the cold. Were they fleeing the advance of the sun's warmth to the most hostile parts of the continent, where the cold was the least yielding, the most persistent, year after year longer and more intense, which also meant moving to longer days of sunshine, more intense in duration, but always to fairly desolate refuges, so as not to lose too much of their origins, always to fairly open lands, so as to feel that they could find themselves even in the most desolate dispersion. Would they have escaped, along with the progress of the solar heat, the progress of the world, of men, of very many and very different men, the flood of beings and things, the fragmentation of space and time, the impoverishment of emptiness?
>
> (Dotremont, 1985, 301–302)

He portrays the Sámi as nomadic, and he wonders about their persistent choosing of remote and unfavourable domiciles. In this, he was right; the Sámi he encountered were traditional herders whose lives followed the natural circulation of the year. Finally, Dotremont pits the Sámi against the arrival of modern culture ('the flood of beings and things') to Sápmi, which for him signifies the potential end of the indigenous way of life through assimilation. He continues:

> I wondered if the Sámi were driven away by other, more numerous and different, more warlike peoples, driven far away, further and further away, not like reindeer but with reindeer, which they themselves chased, sometimes even more mercilessly, but under duress: to eat, to dress, to tame, to care for, to escape. I do not even know in which geological epoch they had begun to leave their primordial home, which geological epochs they had passed through; whether they wandered first from east to west, then travelled from south to north, without ever abandoning the idea, even then, of escape, emptiness, possibility, progress and retreat, their identity, their future, of Eden and Fimbul, of the sun, of ice, of nothing but Fimbul and its Eden.
>
> (Dotremont, 1985, 302)

In Norse mythology, *Fimbulvetr* ('mighty winter') is the harsh season preceding Ragnarök, which brings an end to all life on Earth. In this text, therefore, Dotremont links the nomadic movement with teleological or, to some extent, even eschatological ends. Indeed, for him, the Sámi were a people living in nature, upholding a sustainable relationship with it. As is often the case with indigenous peoples, they also possess particular knowledge about the region and its phenomena. At least Dotremont romanticised them that way. This cultural interest and experience represent

the backdrop against which Dotremont's artistic activity in Sápmi should be seen, that is, not just an idealised empty nature but nature that is inhabited sustainably.

There are however some controversial characteristics in 'Auberge I'. In the text's Thoreauvian and borealistic exotification, the industrialised and civilised 'barbarian culture' has forced the Sámi to flee northwards with their reindeer. Dotremont imagines a cultural integrity and a kind of idyll, bordering on the pastoral, preserved in the north, but he recognises the limitations of his perception and the imaginary character of his impressions. The Sámi end up as objects of his gaze, which emphasises their originality through exotification and even degrading characterisations, such as the explicit comparison of the Sámi to harlequins, gnomes and elves. This is obvious in Dotremont's unfortunate allegory, 'they are our Indians', which identifies culturally distinct indigenous peoples with each other in a non-historical way (Dotremont, 1985, 304). In the mind of the modernism-critical author, the Sámi, living independent of 'the age of religion, imperialism and industrial barbarism', represent a kind of idealised humanity. The text closes with a pivotal credo: 'if I love them, I realise that I have come this far to love them, and to love like them' (p. 304). Through a stereotyping gaze, the indigenous people are given a role as symbolic opponents of urbanisation, but in Dotremont's texts they are seldom granted proper agency, such as personal expression.

6 | LOGOGRAMMATIC POETICS

Sápmi provided the quintessential context for the creation of logograms, as Dotremont himself admitted. A logogram is composed of a set of characters filling a field of writing with a clarifying paratext pencilled below (see Figure 2). With logograms, his aim was to establish a 'verbal-graphic unity', emphasising, on the one hand, the material presence of writing and, on the other, the activity of imagination independent of the textual basis of writing (Dotremont, 1981a, 48). Dotremont aimed to portray writing as such, being a creator of material forms beyond meaning, while suggesting a pre-linguistic negotiation with the environment. Accordingly, for him logograms represented 'true poetry' where 'writing has a word to say' (Dotremont, 1980, 15).

Alongside Sápmi, Dotremont's initial motivation for producing logograms derived from an oft-iterated adage in avant-garde discourse, according to which writing had become banal or 'exhausted'. After the Second World War, a renewed interest in the materiality of writing emerged among experimental writers, leading to inventive experiments by Dotremont's contemporaries, such as Michaux, Brion Gysin, Mirtha Dermisache and the lettrists, to name a few. Logograms emphasise the aesthetic materiality of writing, but Dotremont wanted to avoid entirely detaching himself from language as a medium of expression. According to him, writing 'must be brought to life, but not in an artificially formalistic way. We must bring it back to life profoundly by multiplying the links between form and content, writing and meaning' (Dotremont, 2022, 98). The accusation of formalism was no doubt directed at those experimenting with asemic writing. Admittedly, some logograms come close to asemic writing, because without a paratext it would be impossible to determine their linguistic message. Another similarity is that Dotremont was unwilling to classify his works as any particular form of expression, medium or genre.

The paratext of the logogram in Figure 2 reads: 'In a fine wintry place, snow turns to nightfall, ice reflects the stars, air becomes air again, songbirds sing silence, the pace of the reindeer tears the slowness of lichen, trees celebrate and light a fire, the present opens and multiplies, the view writes the vision' (Dotremont, 2011, 50). The term referring to place in the original text is the neologism 'Finlège', coined by Dotremont, which most likely derives from the Swedish words *fin läge*, literally meaning 'fine place'. The nominalisation of the original term refers to *Finlande*, the French name for Finland. Dotremont's visionary experience is located in a specific geographical place, the characteristics of which he accumulates in his text.[24]

Dotremont also favoured non-grammatical structures and word variations, which is to say that logogrammatic writing takes poetic liberties. In addition to their exuberant spontaneity, logograms could be relatively disciplined
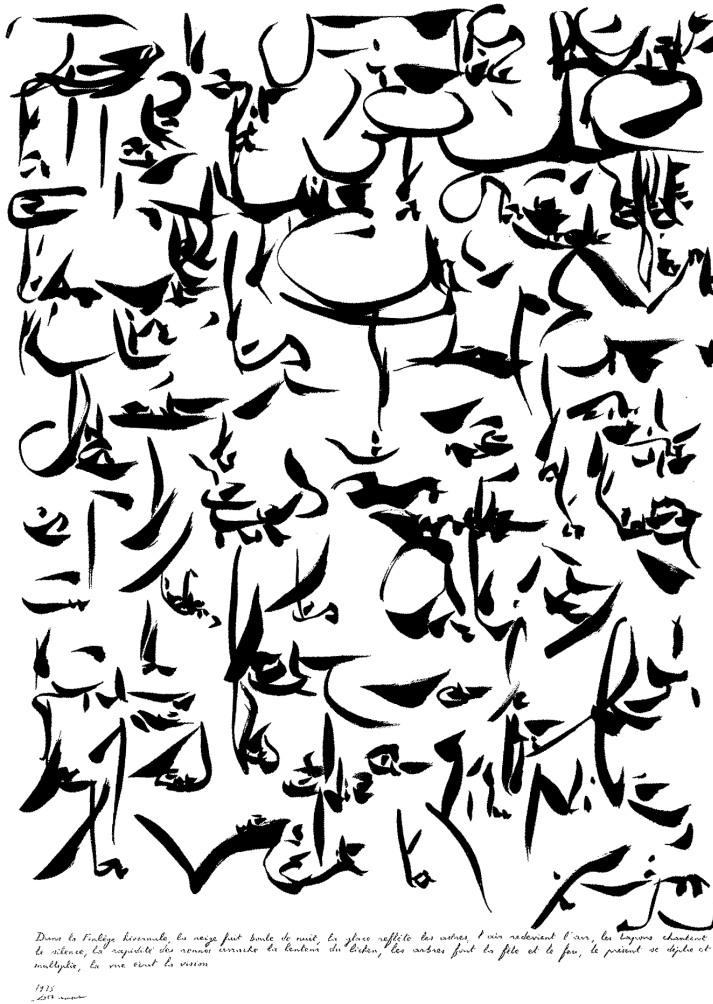
FIGURE 2 A logogram is composed of a spontaneously written text and an accompanying paratext in conventional handwriting (Dotremont, 2011, 64). Christian Dotremont, Centre Pompidou, Inventory no. AM 1975-197.

and still retain their linguistic expressiveness, as in the logogram 'natté renatté' (braided rebraided, 1964; see Figure 3).

The paratext and the English translation of the logogram reveal the principle of its composition:

> natté renatté le
> temps arraché les
> arbres aux cahiers
> blancs d'Inari
> (braided and rebraided
> time torn off
> of the white
> notebooks of Inari)

FIGURE 3 Dotremont's 1964 logogram 'natté renatté' (Dotremont, 2022, 19). Christian Dotremont, 1963–1964, inv. CDPO 03200/1963/003, Coll. Fondation Roi Baudouin, on deposit at the AML, Brussels.

Each ink cluster forms a word written in the paratext. For example, the middle cluster in the top row, 'renatté', is divided into two levels as 're/natté'. Apart from the unusual separation of syllables and word fragments, the logogram's text is read in a relatively standard way, from left to right and from top to bottom, line by line. The literary meaning of the work is understandable, but its mode of expression does not follow the usual patterns or categories of perception (Veivo, 2009, 82). Because of this intentional liminal space between writing and drawing, logograms cannot be assigned to preordained genres, as they do not implement the usual codes of writing and literature.

In 'braided rebraided', site-specificity also manifests on the material level of the work. Its composition reveals a reference to place through its materiality. Namely, the positioning of word clusters and the conventional reading direction emphasise the white space at the bottom right, to which the poem refers. In the original version, the blank space is preceded by the verse that can be translated, word for word, as 'the whites of Inari'. It associates the white emptiness of paper with snow and, furthermore, with the snow of a particular place, Inari—just like Ivalo is crucial in the poem 'Paljon lunta'. The association between the white page and snow was a recurring analogy in Dotremont's logograms and travelogues, which directed his imagination towards Sápmi while creating logograms.

7 | SITE-SPECIFIC WRITERLY ENGAGEMENTS

Dotremont commented straightforwardly on the origins and spatial connections of his word-drawings: 'When I make a logogram, I am like a Lapp in a fast sleigh on a white page[.] Without Lapland, I would not make logograms, I would not make anything at all' (Dotremont, 1980, 15). In short, Sápmi enabled the creation of logograms. This fundamental motivation has been interpreted as the north representing a 'basic metaphor' in the poetics of logograms (Veivo, 2009, 82). However, in the context of site-specificity and Dotremont's experiential liminal space (between nature and art), links between Sápmi and writing evoke a more fundamental proto-ecopoetic connection than mere metaphor. In other words, Dotremont's proto-ecopoetics manifests an awareness of place as the reality behind the text, central to his creative process, which entails a negotiation with the aspects and affects evoked by that place.

A writing strategy can be extracted from Dotremont's notion of experiential liminal space. Emmanuel Pélard describes the creative activity on the border between art and nature with the pertinent neologism *écripaysage*, which derives from the words *écriture* ('writing') and *paysage* ('landscape') (Pélard, 2013).[25] The term locates Dotremont's works in a proto-ecopoetic context, where the contribution of nature to the determination of the sign system—and thus the interpretative framework—must be considered (see Figure 4). Pélard's concept is illustrated by an examination of an early logogram in Figure 4.

The 'pre-logogram' lacks an explanatory paratext, so the sign system is not determined akin to the poetics of later logograms. Hence, it is unclear whether the word-drawing in question is to be viewed or read—or whether it is a logogram. The pre-logogram can be approached either iconographically or literary-theoretically. As iconography focuses on the elements of the image and leads the viewer to consider the work as a drawing, it can be interpreted as a form of stylised mimetics. In this reading, the diagonal lines dividing the image represent topographical forms of the landscape, and the figures at the bottom represent two Sámi and a reindeer. The shape of the trees and twigs poking out of the snow and the reindeer's horns resemble, in Dotremont's words, 'unknown calligraphy' (Dotremont, 1985, 47). However, if the work is read as literature, the diagonal lines can be seen as dividing the field of writing, akin to calligraphy. The details, iconographically interpreted as representing figures and elements of nature, can then be regarded as resembling asemic writing. The deliberate blurring of representational strategies shows how the liminal space of sign systems impacts the perception and interpretation of the work.

FIGURE 4   A 1961 untitled pre-logogram depicting Sápmi (Dotremont, 2011, 23).

Simultaneously, it expresses the (pre)linguistic process of meaning-making where cognitive processes related to writing and affects derived from nature coalesce.

Another experiment that Dotremont committed himself to was his *Écritures espacées* (Spatial writings, 1964).[26] He randomly repeated the word *rhubarbe* ('rhubarb') by writing it in ink on various vehicles. There is an example on a bus travelling along a paved road, and others on an aeroplane, a bus on an unpaved road and a snowcat used by the Finnish Post in Sápmi to deliver mail, goods and people to remote areas. The movement of the body caused by the journey becomes documented, and the written becomes emphatically meaningful in its material manifestation—how the creative body has reacted to a particular movement and the constraints imposed by the mechanical framework. In particular, the sample from the roadless journey between Kaamanen and Sevettijärvi has immortalised the bumps and wobbles along the way; as the wavering of pen and writing surfaces, writing expresses its origin in an immediate material way rather than through linguistic representation and description. Such writing practice produces a sense of place that cannot be identically reproduced.

8 | ON-SITE WRITING ON SNOW AND ICE

Dotremont's most literal site-specific writing is exemplified by his *logoneiges* and *logoglaces*, where the endings of the terms refer to snow (*neige*) and ice (*glace*). In these performative works, writing takes place directly in nature with the tools provided by nature—a wooden stick replaces the pen or brush. The author's intention (the logoneiges' poetical background in logograms) determines that they can be contextualised as writing and not as random drawings or tracks on the snow.[27]

A logoneige exploits the elements of nature, which are materially contingent and temporally variable.[28] On the level of execution, logoneiges mirrored the long brushstrokes of logograms and calligraphy, but Dotremont also mimicked animal tracks among actual animal tracks. In an untitled logoneige from 1978, the track-like patterned impressions added by him resemble the popular heart symbol.[29] A certain aleatoric is also at work in the material realisation of the logoneige, as the print the artist makes is conditioned by the effect that weather has on the snowy surface. Therefore, site-specificity is also expressed through meteorological conditions. Namely, logoneiges could only be realised on a specific type of snow; that is, they are linked not only to a particular place but also to a certain season and its spatial consequences in that landscape.

Temporality is an intentional part of the site-specificity of Dotremont's works on snow and ice. Logoneiges and logoglaces are ephemeral, as the work eventually melts and disappears during the thaw. Such works have no place on the art market, even though they are aesthetically significant precisely because their author was and is an institutionally recognised artist. Evidence of logoneiges has survived only thanks to another medium, the photograph; the images yield the scale and transience of the works. The surviving images, however, document the embodiment of the logoneiges' creation, since the work written (or drawn) on snow traces a movement—specifically Dotremont's movement, specifically in Sápmi. The logoneige indicates that someone was there and, eventually, all traces disappear with its maker.

9 | CODA

Dotremont's texts from Sápmi mirror the time of their writing from the late 1950s until his premature death. The texts cover impressions of landscapes, geological and climatological fascination, local social peculiarities, an immediate realisation of linguistic and cultural otherness, and an ecological view of nature as an inhabited environment—not only by people but by other species as well. His early texts, written in the 1950s, present the north as an idealised utopia while, to some degree, ignoring the linguistic and cultural specificities of the Sámi community.

As an experiencer of Sápmi, he also depended on the very modernisation he was criticising; he benefited, for instance, from electricity, modern means of transport and the developing infrastructure.

The later travel writing emphasises an attempt to understand the different levels of localism (the interconnections between communities and the environment) alongside the author's expression of authentic experience. For Dotremont, the change experienced by the Sámi people was a threat of homogenisation, whereby places began to resemble each other, signifying the loss of a place's specificity. As a site of writing, Sápmi was necessary precisely because of the specificity: snow was like white paper where the punctuating twigs stood out as writing. As Dotremont pointed out, the existence of Sápmi was the fundamental condition for producing logograms. The word-drawings' site-specific character is explicitly linked to Sápmi as a place and a particular kind of 'isolated' region—although Dotremont never encountered an impassable wilderness.

In the context of his travel writing, logograms can be seen as Dotremont's mediated tributes to Sápmi. In lieu of a direct link, he connected his production to a specific place, even if these works were created outside Sápmi. The manifestations of site-specificity indicate the importance of place in Dotremont's poetics, which considers bio-centric and non-human perspectives alongside the budding ecological-ethical dimension of his writing. The proto-ecopoetic understanding of the autonomy of nature and the author's belonging to that nature are the pathways Dotremont's texts open on the north. It is about crossing the boundaries of the self and nature, enabled by a specific place in nature—a particular meridian above the Arctic Circle.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Butor, 1978, unpaginated: 'He has succeeded, better than anyone before him, in relating snow to the whiteness of paper. In the snow, we can see very clearly how a path can become writing. Writing becomes the path of our very existence, the very trace of someone's passage.' All translations by the author unless otherwise stated.

[2] For a cartographic visualisation of the spread of Sámi languages, see: https://nordregio.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/10133_saami_language_EN.jpg.

[3] For instance, Harri Veivo's (2009) article emphasises the connection between logograms and Northern Finland as a metaphorical semiotic framework for interpretation. In his text, Veivo explores the manifestation of border spaces in Dotremont's poetics, which has inspired this study in tracing Dotremont's strategies of writing.

[4] In this article, 'place' refers to a real-world location with its conceptual dimensions (geography, socio-politics, etc.), while 'site' denotes acting in relation to place. Hence, site-specificity means aesthetic action in relation to a particular place.

[5] Writing is 'mobile' in the sense that site-specific art seldom is, whereby site-specific writing's relation to place is not often fixed or material. For a further discussion on site-specific art in this context, see Rugg (2010, esp. 115–138).

[6] The embodied dimension of writing has been central to Asian calligraphy, for example, among *shodō* artists. Logograms resemble calligraphy, yet Dotremont disputed the connection, arguing that calligraphy reproduces a pre-existing text, whereas logograms are spontaneously generated in the act of writing.

[7] On the exploitation of indigenous art relevant to Dotremont, see Jorn (1988) and Kurczynski and Pezolet (2011).

[8] Dotremont earned his spurs in the 1940s in the Belgian surrealist groups La main à plume (The Feathered Hand, 1941–1944) and Surréalisme révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Surrealism, 1947–1948). The Danish artist Asger Jorn joined the latter group and, during 1948, the surrealists recruited the experimental artists of the Amsterdam-based Reflex group to join them. As their collaboration became established, the international avant-garde movement CoBrA was born.

[9] The name derives from the nationalities of the artists who formed it: more specifically, from the French names of the capitals of these nationalities (Copenhague, Bruxelles and Amsterdam). Notably, these cities had little international reputation as avant-garde hotspots, especially with the hegemonic art centres of the time, such as Paris. Instead, CoBrA developed a collaboration of smaller centres.

[10] Such comparisons and interconnecting relationships in turn gave rise to symbolic networks. The snake is an example of such a network: CoBrA regarded snakes as universal metaphors. Because of the mythical and religious symbolism

associated with this particular animal, it was a recurring theme in the work of CoBrA artists. Dotremont moved from the group's mythical and playful conception of nature towards an environmentally conscious sense of place from the mid-1950s onwards.

[11] In her article, Walecka-Garbalinska discusses Dotremont's interest in Sápmi as borealism (for more on borealism, see Briens, 2018 and Lehtonen, 2019). Literary borealism can be best understood as an unwritten set of rhetoric and poetic rules. Through this filter, the peoples, territories and kinds of literature of the Nordic countries are anthropologically, geographically and culturally distinct from other nations. However, most often, natural phenomena (ice, snow, mountains, seas, lakes, fjords, flora and fauna, volcanoes, etc.) had a major effect on the individuals, according to the early twentieth-century borealists.

[12] The first-wave ecopoetics provides a suitable means for analysing Dotremont's texts because they do not deal with urban environments.

[13] The poem was written probably in the 1960s and published posthumously in 1985. The original title is in Finnish.

[14] Dotremont's travel writings are typically short lyrical prose, poems and letters.

[15] Nordic instances include, but are not limited to, the ecological idealism behind the Christiania free city, biological affects in Inger Christensen's book *det*, omnipresent references to nature in Erkki Kurenniemi's experimental music or the ecological awakening of the Finnish group the Harvesters.

[16] An ecopoetic encounter between the human and the other world is conditional on these worlds meeting without the latter being reduced to metaphors (see Gilcrest, 2002, 143–144).

[17] For more on Sápmi as a fictional utopia and dystopia, see Naum (2016).

[18] For example, Sanna Valkonen has developed a method of 'co-knowing', where local knowledge is central in knowledge formation. This is a variant of participatory science in Indigenous Studies (Valkonen, 2014, 350, 353–355).

[19] On post-colonial ecocriticism in the context of traditional Sámi ecological thinking, see Mattila (2015).

[20] For a further discussion, see Groglopo and Suárez-Krabbe (2023).

[21] In the original French text, Dotremont used the Finnish word for Sámi, *saamelainen*.

[22] For more on the decolonisation processes of the Sámi, see Valkonen et al. (2022).

[23] Most often Dotremont spoke of Lapland (*Laponie*) and Laplanders (*lapons*), making a distinction between them and the Sámi, apparently on the basis of external characteristics such as clothing.

[24] Place can also manifest itself materially, as in the logogram Dotremont executed on the cover of a 1965 issue of the daily *Uusi Suomi* (New Finland). The work is linked to both time (by the year of publication) and place (where the magazine was distributed).

[25] Françoise Chenet (1995) alludes to landscape with space and thought, and eventually language in Dotremont's work. However, Dotremont did not want to resort to conventional language as a primary medium in his logogrammatic works.

[26] For images, see http://www.aml-cfwb.be/catalogues/general/titres/218699. In addition, descriptions of modes of transport are included here: https://groundsea.be/wp-content/cache/all/2020/09/08/conversation-on-the-snow/index.html.

[27] The works produced from 1964 onwards represent a text-based version of land art often defined by site-specificity. Also Pélard (2011) discusses logoneiges from land art's point of view.

[28] For the photograph of a logoneige by Caroline Ghyselen, see http://www.aml-cfwb.be/catalogues/general/titres/88156.

[29] For an image, see http://www.aml-cfwb.be/catalogues/general/titres/210428.

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