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► **To cite this version:**

Zoé Ginter, Baptiste Hautdidier. The ‘gift of the new world’: Retelling the trajectories of black Locust in France. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2022, 78, pp.115-125. 10.1016/j.jhg.2022.06.001 . hal-03808744

**HAL Id: hal-03808744**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03808744v1>**

Submitted on 18 Dec 2023

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# The 'gift of the new world': retelling the trajectories of the black Locust tree in France.

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## Abstract

This article provides a detailed account of the shifting places of the black Locust tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) in France, from its introduction as a North American exotic in the early seventeenth century to the present. Three phases or moments are identified, articulating material and discursive dimensions of the trajectory of the tree — and of the spaces where it became prominent: exhortation, instrumentalization and marginalization. Due to a long introduction timeline and unmatched levels of expectations for versatility, the intertwined social-ecological dynamics of black Locust are marked by several reframings and rediscoveries. As such, a geohistorical focus on French 'acacia' landscapes offers an original window on the political economies of past and ongoing regional forest transitions of Western Europe.

**Keywords:** Black locust, forest history, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, socio-ecological dynamics, narratives, botany,

Spring 1941 in the old center of Perpignan, France: a disillusioned, freshly escaped war prisoner started a creative journey that would culminate in a Nobel Prize of literature in 1985. Noticing the moving leaflets looming behind his window, Claude Simon would go on to use the pattern of the courtyard tree, its branching and its foliage as recurring quasi-characters of his subsequent works. Embodying the remission to life of the author, the acceptance of a genealogy marked by chaotic violence, and a rootedness in the writing process itself, the same description marked the incipit of a novel and the very end of another: 'as if the whole tree was waking up, snorting and shaking, then everything calmed down and they resumed their motionlessness'.<sup>1</sup> The tree, as it turned out, was later described as an 'acacia', which for most European mainlanders is the unambiguous vernacular name for what is actually something else: the black Locust, or false acacia (*Robinia Pseudoacacia* L.).

Considering the areas they cover or the role they currently play in environmental disputes, it is fair to advance that the wooded spaces dominated by *Robinia pseudoacacia* have now reached prominence in most continents. Emblematic of such species that may be subject to conflicts of interest

along entrenched but non-trivial lines, black Locust has come to be alternatively envisioned in various circles of forestry professionals, conservationists or dwellers as a valuable resource, an alien species, a weed, a key component of landscapes or a cultural heritage... In the wide array of west European landscapes (gardens, forest patches, transportation corridors, large plantations) where the tree made its way since its very early introduction from Appalachia in the seventeenth century, such trajectory was marked by stasis and unnoticed movements. These periods were interspersed with moments of reckonings, shifting expectations and renewed resolutions, be it from experts, citizens - or writers.

Among the few works dealing with the presence of black Locust in Europe, none has investigated the socio-natural factors of its expansion in France.<sup>2</sup> Several questions remain unanswered: How and why was the tree introduced? Why was it favored, and by whom? How did it impose itself in French landscapes? How did it come to be framed later as an invasive species? Focusing on the evolving relationships towards the tree and tracing its contradictory representa-

<sup>1</sup>C. Simon, *Histoire*, Paris, 1967, 5 ; C. Simon, *l'Acacia*, Paris, 1989, 351 ; J. Gleize and D. Zemmour, (Eds) *Relire L'Acacia, Cahiers Claude Simon*, 11 (2016).

<sup>2</sup>P.N. Renzo Motta and R. Berretti, The rise and fall of the black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia* L.) in the 'Siro Negri' Forest Reserve (Lombardy, Italy): lessons learned and future uncertainties, *Annals of Forest Science* 66(4) (2009) 410–410 ; M. Vítková, J. Müllerová, J. Sádlo, J. Pergl and P. Pyšek, Black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*)

beloved and despised: A story of an invasive tree in Central Europe, *Forest ecology and management* 384 (2017) 287–302; V.N. Nicolescu, C. Hernea, B. Bakti, Z. Keserű, B. Antal and K. Rédei, Black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia* L.) as a multi-purpose tree species in Hungary and Romania: a review, *Journal of forestry research* 29(6) (2018) 1449–1463. F. Krumm and L. Vítková (Eds) *Introduced tree species in European forests: opportunities and challenges*, Freiburg, 2016.

tions, this essay identifies the key material, social and symbolic factors associated with three main contrasted historical configurations. The exercise pertains to environmental history and to the lines of thought initiated by the new cultural geography: inasmuch as historical accounts of plant transfers reveal the shaping of material dynamics by dominant worldviews, they should include shifts in value systems, ideologies and symbolic representations, paying attention to discourses and their performative aspects.<sup>3</sup> Because expectations and imaginaries play an important role in shaping environmental change, a special care was drawn to retrace narratives supporting or not the expansion of the tree, and more globally to discourses, and the social and political context in which they emerged.<sup>4</sup>

Our research relies on mostly French archival materials (administrative reports, books, letters, cadastres and maps, engravings and photographs, press writings) from the seventeenth to the twentieth century: digital collections of the French national library (*Bibliothèque Nationale de France*) and of the Library of Congress (USA) were complemented by on-site archives holdings in Paris and in the Bordeaux region.<sup>5</sup> A preliminary exploration phase delivered an overview of the main themes, narratives and challenges associated with black locust, followed by a targeted research strategy providing chronologic, geographic, and thematic details.

The objective of this paper is not to retrace in an exhaustive way the history of black Locust in France, but to outline consecutive (and sometimes overlapping) moments or ethos, characterized by particular discourses, theories and

ideas that arise out of the particular socio-economic-ecological context of that period.<sup>6</sup> So doing, we identify how various natural, cultural, and social dimensions came to be articulated in the trajectory of a tree, both within and outside a traditional sector, its norms and commodification networks. Such an account contributes to a literature demonstrating how non-human entities (here forests and their trees) ultimately differ from, or resist to the classical patterns of commodification and their incorporation into particular political, economic and spatial forms.<sup>7</sup>

## FROM AN ORNAMENTAL NEWCOMER TO THE MAKING OF A RESOURCE

The tree's current binomial is unchanged since its attribution in 1740 by Carl von Linné, who had then chosen to pay tribute to the Frenchman Jean Robin (1550—1629). Court apothecary and King's arborist, Robin allegedly planted the first European black Locust. A sign board posted next to a surviving specimen in the current square Viviani in Paris for long reproduced the claim of a plantation in 1601, making the tree the oldest of the city. Robin's son, Vespasien (1579—1662), followed him as a botanical 'under-demonstrator' at the royal garden, today known as the *Jardin des Plantes*.

Yet, the oldest written mention of the tree in France can only be dated to 1635. Basing his description on an adult tree planted by the Robins, Jacques-Philippe Cornut included the species in his catalogue *Canadensium plantarum historia* under the name *Acacia americana Robini*.<sup>8</sup> But such a specimen was then not alone in Europe, as John Tradescant the elder (1570—1638) also listed a *Locusta virginiana arbor* in

<sup>3</sup> P. Robbins, Culture and politics of invasive species, *Geographical Review* 94(2) (2004) iii–iv; J. Carruthers, L. Robin, J.P. Hattingh, C.A. Kull, H. Rangan, B.W. van Wilgen, A native at home and abroad: the history, politics, ethics and aesthetics of acacias, *Diversity and Distributions* 17(5) (2011) 810–821.; W. Beinart and L. Wotshela, *Prickly Pear: A Social History of a Plant in the Eastern Cape*, Johannesburg, 2011; D.H. Alderman, Channing cope and the making of a miracle vine, *Geographical Review* 94(2) (2004) 157–77; U. Starfinger, I. Kowarik, M. Rode and H. Schepker, From desirable ornamental plant to pest to accepted addition to the flora? – the perception of an alien tree species through the centuries, *Biological Invasions* 5(4) (2003) 323–35.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. Porter and S. Randalls, Politics of expectations: nature, culture and the production of space, *Geoforum* 52 (2014): 203–205; M. Borup, N. Brown, K. Konrad and H. Van Lente, The sociology of expectations in science and technology, *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 18(3–4) (2006) 285–298; J. Tassin and C.A. Kull, Facing the broader dimensions of biological invasions,

*Land Use Policy* 42(c) (2015) 165–69; A. Corvol, *Les arbres voyageurs*, Paris, 2005; Alderman, Channing cope and the making of a miracle vine.

<sup>5</sup> The sources came mainly from the Ministry of Agriculture (and its Forestry Department), as well as Economic Affairs (*Archives départementales de Gironde, Archives nationales*). Of particular interest were the holdings of François de Neufchâteau (French national archives - 27AP/1-27AP/17), a fervent 'Acacia' proselytizer.

<sup>6</sup> Carruthers, Robin, Hattingh, Kull, Rangan and van Wilgen, A native at home and abroad.

<sup>7</sup> A. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, 2015; S. W. Prudham, *Knock on Wood, Nature as commodity in Douglas Fir Country*, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> The choice of the genus was stemming from a resemblance with the Acacia gum tree (now *Vachellia nilotica*) known by the Greeks, and described by Dioscorides. Among the shared botanical features: thorny branches, flowers and pods.

the 1634 catalogue of his garden in South Lambeth, London.<sup>9</sup> Tradescant, who was then Keeper of His Majesty's Garden and a central figure of the British botanical circles, had a keen interest in American plants. He also had nurtured strong connections with the Virginia Company and its fledging colony of Jamestown.<sup>10</sup>

A potent argument for a 'Virginian' pathway is the favorable location of the Jamestown colony. Recent genetic evidence suggests indeed that a vast majority of the *Robinia* sp. introduced in Europe came from the north-eastern tip of its Appalachian native range (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the distances between those tentative original populations and the European settlers were much shorter in the case of the Virginia Company than for any of the contemporary settlements of New France.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it was in the vicinity of the Jamestown colony that the oldest written observations of black Locust were made. Describing around 1610 how his neighbors of the Powhatan confederacy relied on natural resources, the colonist Strachey specifically cited the tree, adding two noticeable features: a preferential location near native settlements, a strong appropriation by use:

by the dwellings of the salvages are.... a kynd of low tree, which bears a cod (pod) like to the peas, but nothing so big: we take yt to be locust [...] The bowes are of some young plant, eyther of the locust-tree or of weech.<sup>13</sup>

150 km further north in Lancaster county (Southeastern Pennsylvania), a re-analysis of historical georeferenced data also identified a positive association between *Robinia* sp. and Susquehannock village sites that were occupied at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup>

This further evidence offers a credible explanation for the first leg of the path to Europe: before the European settlement, members of both Algonquian and Iroquoian nations had purposively moved black Robust to the coasts, as part of their strong but long underplayed agency in the shaping of 'Virginian' landscapes.

As regards the second leg of the trip, conclusive evidence is scarcer. Tradescant's involvement with the Virginia Company, combined with the evidence of sustained friendly exchanges with the Robins, and the absence of any mention of the tree in their own books and inventories, led several authors to speculate that it was Tradescant who had probably sent pods or saplings to the elder Robin.<sup>15</sup> While a role of Parisian florists should not be definitively ruled out, it appears in any case that an especially favorable window for the exchange would have been in mid 1625, during a visit of Tradescant in Paris.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> R.T. Gunther, *Early British botanists and their gardens*, Oxford, 1922, 339.

<sup>10</sup> Having personally invested the hefty sum of £50 in two of its expeditions. J. Potter, *Strange blooms: the curious lives and adventures of the John Tradescants*, London, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> X.P. Bouteiller, C.F. Verdu, E. Aikio, P. Bloese, K. Dainou, A. Delcamp, O. De Thier, E. Guichoux, C. Mengal, A. Monty, M. Pucheu, M. van Loo, A.J. Porté, L. Lassois, S. Mariette, A few north Appalachian populations are the source of European black Locust. *Ecology and Evolution*, 9(5), 2019, 2398–2414; E.L. Jr Little, *Atlas of United States trees, volume 1, conifers and important hardwoods*, Misc. Pub. 1146, Washington D.C., 1971.

<sup>12</sup> On the John Smith 1612 map, the furthest charted places in 1608–1609 are along the Pamunkey, Rappahanock and Potomac rivers. The main French settlement was the Port-Royal *habitation* in Nova Scotia, where Poutrincoort had taken plants to be presented to the court of Henry IV in 1607. The southern tips of Samuel Champlain's explorations are Rhode-Island in 1606–1607, Lake Champlain in 1609–1613, Lake Ontario in 1615–1616, and New York in 1615. C.M. Parsons, *A Not-So-New World: Empire and Environment in French Colonial North America*, Philadelphia, 2018; J.S. Pringle, How 'Canadian' is Cornut's *Cana-densium plantarum historia*? A phytogeographic and historical analysis, *Canadian Horticultural History*, 1 (1988), 190–209.

<sup>13</sup> W. Strachey and R.H. Major, *The historie of travaile into Virginia Britania: expressing the cosmographie and comodities of the country, together with the manners and customes of the people*, London, 1849,

105 & 130. Cited by C.S. Sargent, *The silva of North America*, Boston, 1892; T. DeGomez, Tom and M.R. Wagner, Culture and use of black Locust, *HortTechnology* 2 (2001) 279–288.

<sup>14</sup> The witness-trees described in warrantee township maps were established to document land purchases in Pennsylvania from 1682 onwards. B.A. Black and M.D. Abrams, Influences of native Americans and surveyor biases on metes and bounds witness-tree distribution. *Ecology* 9 (2001) 2574–2586.

<sup>15</sup> J. Robin, *Catalogus stirpium tam indigerarum, quam exoticarum quae Lutetiae coluntur*, Paris, 1601; V. Robin, *Enchiridion isagogicum ad facilem noticiam stirpium, tam indigenarum, quam exoticarum*, Paris, 1623; K. Wein, Die erste Einführung nordamerikanischer Gehölze in Europa Mitt. *Der DDG*, 42 (1930) 137–163; M.F. Warner, Jean and Vespasien Robin, 'Royal Botanists', and North American Plants, 1601–1635. *The National Horticultural Magazine*, 35 (1956) 214–220; A. Mea, *The Tradescants: their plants, gardens and museum, 1570-1662*, London, 1964; F.J. Peabody, A 350-Year-Old American Legume in Paris, *Castanea*, 1 (1982) 99–104.

<sup>16</sup> A. MacGregor, *Tradescant's rarities: essays on the foundation of the Ashmolean museum (1683), with a catalogue of the surviving early collections*, Oxford, 1983; Potter, *Strange blooms*, 185–189; A. As-selin, J. Cayouette and J. Mathieu, *Curieuses histoires de plantes du Canada. Tome 1 (1000–1670)*, Québec, 2014, 155–158.



There is much less doubt on the next steps: the Robins were at the center of a Parisian distribution hub that reached a quick prominence.<sup>17</sup> The writings of Pierre Morin can illustrate how fast the spread of the *Acacia de l'Amérique* could have been in the circles of gardens owners and designers. In a horticulture handbook that would be reedited over five decades, he devoted in 1658 several chapters to trees, where the 'acacia' was omnipresent in lists for various intended uses: 'high-forest groves, covered alleys, country house alignments, high palisades'.<sup>18</sup> Such proposal demonstrates both the prevalence of the tree and an assumption for a high versatility. A Parisian specimen, planted by Vespasien Robin, was in the Royal Garden by 1636.<sup>19</sup> In Leiden, the *Acacia Americana Robini* was added to Vorst's catalogue between 1636 and 1643.<sup>20</sup> In 1655, the tree was inventoried in the botanical royal garden of Blois, and it had reached Padua and Florence in 1662.<sup>21</sup> John Evelyn, who knew well continental pleasure gardens, considered in 1670 the 'Virginian Acacia' as a recent fad brought in England by 'the French'.<sup>22</sup> Interested in the healing capacities of the tree, but mostly in its refinement, 'florists' deliberately enriched Parisian landscapes with the species. Gardeners and agronomists prized its foliage, its dashing flowers in pendent clusters, and its delicate smell as symbols of elegance and refinement. As is so often the case for introduced species, ornamental use had preceded the quest for other outlets.<sup>23</sup> As the seventeenth century was marked by a passion for horticulture, plants – exotic and rare – became markers of social distinction.<sup>24</sup> Acacia would therefore remain a tree of literate elites

for a century, before a severe turn of tide, attested around 1717 by Liger:

In the past it was seen, especially due to novelty, that a lot of acacias were grown; but it has come, so to speak, to near disgust. We used to plant alleys of the tree and make cradles out of it. It grows very fast, and in the spring produces flowers with a very pleasant smell, but as it is very prone to felling, has a rough bark and very small foliage, it was no longer cared for in ornamental gardens; and if it is still seen in some places, it is because it was left there.<sup>25</sup>

Esthetical defects, such as crown irregularity, branch spacing, brittleness and a noncompliance to pruning were singled out. Arguably, the tree did not meet the regular and geometrical requirements of the then-fashionable "French gardens". Later, Georges Lefebvre, then in charge of the promenades of the city of Paris, could say of the species that it was irregular, unruly and "resistant to pruning".<sup>26</sup> The rivalry with other species (such as horse Chestnut – *Aesculus hippocastanum*) soon led to its disfavor, and a near total neglect in the literature. The tree yet continued a more silent progression, as attested by Vaillant, who seemed to consider before 1722 that the tree was on the loose near Paris, where it was commonly found 'in the countryside'.<sup>27</sup> Duhamel du Monceau — one of the founders of modern agronomy and forestry — noted that black Locust had had its vicissitudes during the eighteenth century:

<sup>17</sup> F. Egmond, *The World of Carolus Clusius: Natural History in the Making, 1550–1610*, Bloomsbury, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> P. Morin, *Remarques nécessaires pour la culture des fleurs*. Paris, 1658, 111, 113, 116 & 126: 'Arbres propres à faire Bosquets de haute fustaye [...] Arbres à faire Allées couvertes [...] Arbres propres à faire les Avenués des Maisons de Campagne [...] Palissades hautes' (all translations by authors).

<sup>19</sup> With a stump still alive in 2022. It may then have been registered as *Acatia indica*: G. de la Brosse, *Description du jardin royal des plantes médicinales établey par le roi Louis le Juste à Paris, contenant le catalogue des plantes qui y sont de présent cultivées, ensemble le plan du jardin*, Paris, 1636: 28.

<sup>20</sup> A. Vorst, *Catalogus plantarum horti academici Lugduno-Batavi*, Leiden, 1643; cited by J. Buis, *Historia Forestis: Nederlandse Bosgeschiedenis*, Wageningen, 1985, 532. Wein (*Die erste Einführung nordamerikanischer Gehölze in Europa*, 154) proposed 1641.

<sup>21</sup> The Blois garden had been constituted over the two previous decades under the patronage of Gaston d'Orléans, brother of the king Louis XIII. A. Brunier, *Hortus regius Blesensis*, Paris, 1655.

<sup>22</sup> J. Evelyn, *Sylva: Or A Discourse of Forest-Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesties Dominions*, London, 1670, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Corvol, *Les arbres voyageurs*.

<sup>24</sup> L. Allorge and O. Ikor, *La Fabuleuse odysée des plantes : Les botanistes voyageurs, les Jardins des plantes, les Herbiers*, Paris, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> L. Liger, *Le jardinier fleuriste, ou La culture universelle des fleurs, arbres, arbustes, arbrisseaux servant à l'embellissement des jardins*, Paris 1717, 356-359. L. Liger, *Dictionnaire pratique du bon menager de campagne et de ville : avec un traité de tout ce qui concerne la cuisine, les confitures, la pâtisserie, les liqueurs de toutes sortes, les chasses différentes, la peche et autres divertissemens*, Paris, 1722, 8: 'On a vu autrefois, et surtout dans la nouveauté, qu'on élevait beaucoup d'acacias ; mais aujourd'hui on s'en est pour ainsi dire dégoûté. On en plantait des allées, et on en formait des berceaux. Il croît fort vite et produit dans le printemps des fleurs dont l'odeur est fort agréable : mais comme il est fort sujet à se verser, qu'il a l'écorce raboteuse et le feuillage très petit, on ne s'en est plus soucié dans les jardins d'ornement ; et si l'on en voit encore en quelques endroits, c'est qu'on les y a bien voulu laisser.'

<sup>26</sup> George Lefebvre, *Plantations d'alignement, promenades, parcs et jardins publics : service municipal, Vicq-Dunod Paris, 1897*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> S. Vaillant, *Botanicon Parisiense, ou Dénombrement par ordre alphabétique des plantes qui se trouvent aux environs de Paris [...]*, Leiden & Amsterdam, 1727, 165: 'Je rapporte icy cette arbre, par ce que je l'ay trouvé en Campagne. Il faut donc la nommer, afin que les Ecoliers, qui la trouvent, la puissent connoitre'.



After being the object of infatuation, it became that of the most complete disgust [...] but since fifty years it has resumed his first favor. The esteem relies now less on its pleasing qualities, which have made him the pet of fashion whims, than on the useful qualities to which one returns sooner or later.<sup>28</sup>

Such revival originated in scholarly circles. The switch from Latin to French in academic publishing contributed to broadening the audience. 'Acacia nostras' was in 1751 one of the early entries of Diderot and d'Alembert's first volume of the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. From fashionable, black Locust was becoming a resource worthy of experiments. Prominent authors, such as Jussieu, Médecus and the aforementioned Duhamel du Monceau, promoted the benefits of its cultivation and this rediscovery probably encouraged a new wave of planting outside the capital city. Rapid growth and a tolerance of varying soil conditions were key arguments, along with new prospective uses of the tree. As related by Baudrillart: 'It is used to make good hoops, excellent staves, very good and beautiful furniture. It could provide good carpentry parts'.<sup>29</sup> Progressively, the species revealed a potential.

The promotion of these 'useful qualities' was an important step in a period when proto-industrial uses of wood were on the rise. Moreover, techno-scientific progress and global exploration were congruent drives for the acclimatization of new species in pre-revolutionary France. Not so new in this regard, Black locust was enlisted nonetheless in these efforts. In 1785, the Royal Society of Agriculture of Paris entrusted the seasoned botanist André Michaux<sup>30</sup> to the United States to study the potential of local tree species (eg.

*Acer rubrum*, *Liriodendron tulipifera*...). During a stay of eleven years he sent 60 000 trees to France, via ad hoc acclimatization gardens set up in New Jersey (North Bergen) and Southern Carolina (Charleston). These missions continued after the revolution, in order to find species to reforest the young democracy: his son François-André published in 1812 a work on North American trees where black Locust was given a major treatment, enhancing the visibility of various outlets and uses for black Locust wood in its original range (carpentry, shipbuilding, fences...)<sup>31</sup>

The tree, formerly found in private gardens of the elites, had benefitted from the shipments of the Michaux to the Royal domain of Rambouillet<sup>32</sup>, and was progressively being given a prime position in the *écoles d'arbres* (ancestors of arboretums) and in tree nurseries. The park 'de Mousseaux' (now 'parc Monceau' in Paris) made of *Robinia* one its priorities, sowing 60 kg of seeds in 1801 and 120 kg in 1803.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, a long sequence of Franco-British wars (1756—1815) had certainly hindered access to plant collections and wood resources across the Channel and the Atlantic. In order to adapt to the continental blockade decreed by Napoléon in 1806, furniture-makers replaced Mahogany, and other exotic woods harder to import from the Western Indies, by 'local' European woods such as Beech or Plane tree, but also black Locust. Praised for its good mechanical qualities and durability, black Locust cabinetwork became then a hallmark of the 'Empire' furniture style.<sup>34</sup> This—highly constrained—interest contributed further to the acclimatization of the tree, leading the path for a naturalization.

<sup>28</sup> H.L. Duhamel du Monceau, *Traité des arbres et arbustes, que l'on cultive en pleine terre en France, par Duhamel*, Paris, 1804 [1755], 61: 'Après avoir été l'objet de l'engouement il devint celui du dégoût le plus abject [...] mais depuis cinquante ans il reprend sa première faveur; l'estime qu'on a pour lui se fonde maintenant moins sur ses qualités agréables qui l'ont rendu le jouet du caprice de la mode que sur des qualités utiles auxquelles on revient tôt ou tard'.

<sup>29</sup> 'On en fait de bons cerceaux, d'excellents merrains, de forts bons et beaux meubles. Il pourrait fournir de bonnes pièces de charpente'. Baudrillart, in: F.A.L von Burgsdorf, *Nouveau manuel forestier: à l'usage des agents forestiers de tous grades*. Tome 1, (translated by J.J Baudrillart), Paris, 1808, 239.

<sup>30</sup> He was a correspondent to the Royal Garden (*correspondant du Jardin*) since 1779 and became in 1795 an associate member of the *Académie des Sciences*. E.C. Spary, *Utopia's garden. French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution*, University of Chicago

Press, Chicago, 2000: 74-75; Y. Laissus, *Les voyageurs naturalistes du Jardin du roi et du Muséum d'histoire naturelle: essai de portrait-robot*, *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 34(3-4) (1981) 259-317, 290.

<sup>31</sup> Corvol, *Les arbres voyageurs, 186-87*. F.A. Michaux, *Histoire des arbres forestiers de l'Amérique septentrionale*, Tome 2, Paris, 1812. William Cobbett, who would later boast himself of having sold 'more than a million' of Locust seedlings from his nursery in Kensington, acknowledged that the exclusive source of his seeds, in the vicinity of Harrisburg, PA, had also been identified by Michaux. W. Cobbett, *The Woodlands*, London, 1825, § 325-326.

<sup>32</sup> Spary, *Utopia's garden*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Bagot, Notice descriptive de la pépinière d'arbres forestiers du Parc de Mousseaux, *Annales de l'agriculture française*, 1806, 55-60.

<sup>34</sup> At least for structural uses, Mahogany keeping its dominance for wood veneer.

## TO THE FRAMING OF A 'FOREST' SPECIES

Such is the spirit of the century, it required, without doubt, the revolution, and the destruction of forests, to usefully adopt the cultivation of acacia and some trees relegated to ornamental plantations.<sup>35</sup>

Because trees and afforestation had, by the end of the eighteenth century, gained symbolic traction in political discourses, black Locust came predictably to be appropriated as a sign of renewal by the Republic.<sup>36</sup> While royalist arboreal symbolics focused on the embodiment of sacredness and majesty, the revolutionaries sought freedom and emancipation. The 'acacia' fitted in such a frame: it benefited from the dedication of one day in the short-lived republican calendar and was shortlisted as candidate species for newly planted liberty trees.<sup>37</sup> From 1790, many French municipalities committed to the revolutionary cause had indeed started planting trees in public squares, emulating the example of the Boston liberty tree. But because 'decaying or dead nature [could] only be the emblem of despotism', the National Convention felt compelled by the high mortality rate of the plantations, and missioned its agricultural under-committee to replenish them. Two of its members lobbied for North American trees, including the 'Acacia': the abbot Grégoire argued in favor of agreement and usefulness, while the fervent revolutionary Franc Hell proposed as 'fraternity trees' the 'exotic trees acclimatized in France, mostly those natural to the soil of our brothers and friends from septentrional America, to signify that the French people want to live in peace with all the peoples in the world.'<sup>38</sup> This anecdotal evidence marks, if anything else, the beginning of another infatuation phase spurred by symbolic and economic contributions. Praising affective attachment and

alleged benefits from plantation efforts, the imagined geographies of the Acacia forests could then verge on the panegyric:

We will be forced to thank God's Providence for providing us with a plant of alike fertility, of general use, and of such great utility (...) One day will come that the value of acacia will truly be appreciated: then our rivers, our mountains, our substantial hillsides will be populated by this precious tree, which must provide the most handy and the best of utility woods.<sup>39</sup>

A staunch advocate of the tree was a prominent figure of the first Republic: François de Neufchâteau (1750—1828), former speaker of the legislative Assembly and twice minister of the interior under the *Directoire*. Author of various influential texts on the matter, he drafted in 1803 a synthesis of previous works, expanding the list of the expected services: heating, industry timber, wool dyeing, fences and posts...<sup>40</sup> Urging for large afforestation programs by both public and private owners, he substantially contributed to the tree's rediscovery in this active period in agriculture and forestry.

Under the empire, several circulars and publications from the forest administration publicized and encouraged black Locust plantations. Later on, several regional agricultural societies, heavily invested by Neufchâteau and his followers, would offer awards to Acacia afforesters.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, under the consensual aim of reforesting the country, an alliance of circumstances was forged between conservative foresters and saint-Simonian liberal circles. Highly critical of individualism and modernity, the former saw an opportunity to restore order and national interests, while the latter were wary that a destruction of forests would threaten

<sup>35</sup> 'Tel est l'esprit du siècle, il fallait, sans doute, la crise de la révolution, et la destruction des forêts, pour adopter utilement la culture de l'acacia et de quelques arbres relégués dans les plantations d'agrément.' in *Journal d'agriculture et des arts, et feuille d'avis*, Bourg, 1809; *Archives départementales de l'Ain*, 2017—6634, 26.

<sup>36</sup> L. Auricchio, E. Heckendorn Cook and G. Pacini (Eds) *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660—1830*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Oxford, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Between 1793 and 1806. The day was Prairial 14<sup>th</sup> (the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> of June), between the days of the 'pea' and the 'quail'. About thirty trees, overwhelmingly indigenous, were in the list.

<sup>38</sup> Y. Letouzey, Les arbres de la liberté en l'an II. *Revue forestière française* 11 (1961), 685—692; see also M. Ozouf, Du mai de liberté à l'arbre de la liberté: symbolisme révolutionnaire et tradition paysanne. *Ethnologie française* 5 (1975), 9—32; G. Pacini, La Tige Monarchique [Et] L'arbre De La République: Trees and the Body

Politic in Revolutionary France, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 3 (2018) 407—25.

<sup>39</sup> 'On se verra forcé de remercier la divine Providence de nous avoir fourni un végétal d'une fécondité semblable, d'un usage général, et d'une utilité aussi grande [...] Un jour viendra que l'acacia sera apprécié à toute sa valeur: alors nos cours d'eau, nos montagnes, nos coteaux substantiels, se peupleront de cet arbre précieux, devant fournir le plus utile comme le meilleur des bois de service.' P. Antelme, *Traité d'agriculture élémentaire, pratique et raisonnée. Tome 1*, Valence, 1853, 475—478.

<sup>40</sup> Among the discussed authors: Bohadsch, Balan, St John de Crèvecoeur, Filassier M. Deemar-Basse. N.L.F. de Neufchâteau, *Lettre sur le robinier, connu sous le nom impropre de faux acacia*, Paris, 1803.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, M. Cambon was distinguished for its plantations on sandy lands in Blanquefort, near Bordeaux.



the advent of a desirable ‘industrial order’. Resulting notably in the 1827 forest code, the revamped policy favored a deep reshuffling of management practices while accelerating the spatial (and juridical) partitioning of agriculture and forests.<sup>42</sup> In this context, black Locust was already intimately tied with noticeable swathes of the rural economy. The nascent forestry administration pushed yet early and explicitly for its further expansion and mainstreaming. In a pressing political/economical context, the tree fitted both the ambitions of the forestry corps and the strong drive for the reclamation of uncultivated lands.<sup>43</sup> To these stakes, black Locust was presented by a few authors as one, if not the lone, answer.

New (or at least reframed) ecological expectations were keys to this promotion. Relying on fertility and renewal symbols, forest (and non-forest) literature then valued life-history traits associated with proliferation and plasticity: suckering, resprouting, connecting roots, tolerance for poor soils. While some authors went so far as to advocate for large replacements, others focused on abilities that were the most valuable from a civil engineering standpoint: fixation of slopes and erosion control. Upland restoration was after 1860 at the core of the scientific and political efforts of the forestry administration, with a discursive framing of interventions described as beneficial to the poorest inhabitants.<sup>44</sup> In the Haute-Garonne *département*, Black locust was selected with *Ailanthus altissima* for marginal but ‘strategic’ mountain slope restoration:

Black Locust was chosen mostly because it grows fast and it mattered to strike the minds of the populations by a result as immediate as possible.<sup>45</sup>

But disappointment came fast, as plantations suffered from harsh winters, prompting agronomists and foresters to restrict their advocacy for foothill areas and riverbanks.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, a broader move was underway, as the rise of forest economics had deeply reshuffled French silvicultural doctrines: predominant coppice systems were targeted for a massive conversion to even-aged high-forests. Advertised as more profitable and adapted to timber market needs, the high forest treatment had also the advantage of discarding short-termist logics, legitimizing the forestry corps as wardens of the future.

Accordingly, the course given at the Nancy forestry school recommended in 1855 the management of black Locust in even-aged stands with a ‘harvestability’ of 60–70 years.<sup>47</sup> But such practice was hardly followed, partly out of concern for windfall vulnerability, but mainly because coppicing offered quicker financial return, with low investments and shorter rotations of twenty years or less.

Another obstacle to the mainstreaming of *Robinia* plantations resided in the long thorns of its young branches and suckers. Previously hailed for forming impenetrable hedges ‘keeping brigands away’, they had become a liability in increasingly worked environments, as reluctant woodcutters considered those woods as ‘tough’, ‘dangerous’, and even ‘deadly’, sometimes asking for extra payment.<sup>48</sup> Newly selected thornless varieties such as *Robinia spectabilis* or *Robinia inermis* (in the Vilmorin catalogue since 1783) became focus of interest. Despite several trials, the *spectabilis* variety remained sterile, barring its use in large afforestation programs.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> G. Decocq, C. Vlassopoulos and B. Kalaora, *La Forêt salvatrice: Reboisement, société et catastrophe au prisme de l'histoire*, Paris, 2016; B. Kalaora and A. Savoye, *La forêt pacifiée; sylviculture et sociologie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1986; R. Larrère and O. Nougarede, *La forêt dans l'histoire des systèmes agraires: de la dissociation à la réinsertion*, *Cahiers d'Économie et de Sociologie Rurales*, 15 (1990) 11–38.

<sup>43</sup> *Annales forestières: faisant suite au Mémorial forestier ou Recueil complet de lois, arrêtés et instructions relatifs à l'administration forestière*, N° XIX, novembre 1809, Bibliothèque nationale de France, F-28174; R. Beau, *L'imaginaire des friches et la nature ordinaire*, in: Ph. Hamman (Ed) *Ruralité, nature et environnement*, Paris, 2017, 375–400.

<sup>44</sup> T. L. White, *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France* (Yale University Press, 2000). ‘Reboisement des montagnes’, in S. Frézar (Ed), *Revue des eaux et forêts*, 1863.

<sup>45</sup> Conseil général de la Haute-Garonne, *Rapports et délibérations*, Toulouse, 1861, 25–26, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 8-LK16-83 <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb34438951j>

<sup>46</sup> Institut des recherches agronomiques, *Annales de la science agronomique française et étrangère*, Paris, 1909.

<sup>47</sup> B. Lorentz, *Cours élémentaire de culture des bois*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Paris, 1855, 231–232, BNF, département Sciences et techniques, S-30555.

<sup>48</sup> C. Combault, *Mémoire sur les Robinia pseudo acacia, viscosa et hispida*, séance du 3 mars 1837, *Mémoires de la Société royale des sciences, belles-lettres et arts d'Orléans* (1837) 59, Collection numérique: Fonds régional: Centre-Val de Loire, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32813402r>

<sup>49</sup> Séance du 3 décembre 1851, *Bulletin des séances de la Société royale et centrale d'agriculture: compte rendu mensuel* (1851) 65–68 <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb343505794>

Concurrence with coniferous species was another factor preventing a further upscaling. The massive ‘conversion’ effort of French forests entailed indeed changes in both silviculture and composition, as the forestry administration considered the lag between dominant native broadleaf species and rising industrial demands (construction timber, mine shafts...). Monospecific and simplified softwood plantations offered a level of legibility, yield and standardization that other trees could not match. The unruly and unpredictable black Locust was then outpaced in reforestation efforts by rapid growth coniferous species such as Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*), or introduced species such as Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) or the Atlas Cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*).<sup>50</sup> This growing reliance on softwood (or *enrésinement*) was yet met with oppositions: in the Fontainebleau forest, the painters of the Barbizon school were staunch opponents of the Pines (*P. sylvestris* and *pinaster*) favored by the forest administration<sup>51</sup>. But in such settings where critics revolved on aesthetic grounds and opinioned conceptions of the picturesque, ‘new’ trees such as the black Locust had no particular advantage, as they might end up being considered as equally ‘out-of-place’ as the coniferous species.

Conversely, an inability to fully blend into the new silvicultural logics led the forest administration to give an ancillary status to black Locust: widely planted on river or railway embankments, benefitting strongly from new dynamics of agricultural land abandonment, it was purged from large production-oriented estates. As attested in 1911 in the forest administration journal, acacia had gradually become a ‘second order’ species, neither forgotten nor actively promoted:

Whatever the value and usefulness of the small timber supplied by acacia coppices, these goods are, however, far from being as interesting as softwood lumber, [which] should always remain the goal of the foresters [...] We should therefore consider acacia as a tree species for: 1°) A low-cost establishment of wooded cover on bare lands, 2°) A quick provider of profitable goods. But its role will only be ephemeral.<sup>52</sup>

## BEING NATURALIZED AND ANCILLARY

While the rift with the forestry administration was growing, two social and cultural developments were decisive steps for a further acclimatization of the species: its identification with smallholders’ private forests and its appropriation as a tree of everyday life.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, local and popular uses had been multiplied (Fig. 2a). The flower was incorporated in fritters, liquors, remedies and ointments. A 1925 agricultural compendium of Burgundy considered it ‘perfume[d] the air and [was] used by the good housewives to make candies and sweets’.<sup>53</sup> The tree was then also widespread enough to be within reach of most rural and urban dwellers: ‘all you have to do is reach out and pick these fragrant bunches’.<sup>54</sup> It is not insignificant that many places were named after the presence of the tree: in 2021, the total amounts to no less than 3861 streets or ways for the whole country.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> H. Badoux, quoted in L. Pardé, Les essences exotiques dans la forêt Suisse, *Revue Des Eaux et Forêts*, 62 (1924).

<sup>51</sup> V. Moriniaux, *Les Français face à l’enrésinement. XVI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Unpublished PhD manuscript, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> A. Jolyet, Les taillis d’acacia, *Revue des eaux et forêts* (1911) 257–261: ‘Quelles que soient la valeur et l’utilité des petits bois d’œuvre fournis par le taillis d’acacia, ces marchandises sont loin cependant de présenter autant d’intérêt que la planche de résineux. La production de cette dernière me paraît devoir toujours rester l’objectif des reboiseurs. [...] Il semble donc que l’on doive considérer l’acacia comme une essence permettant : 1° De créer à très bon compte l’état boisé d’un terrain nu. 2° De fournir

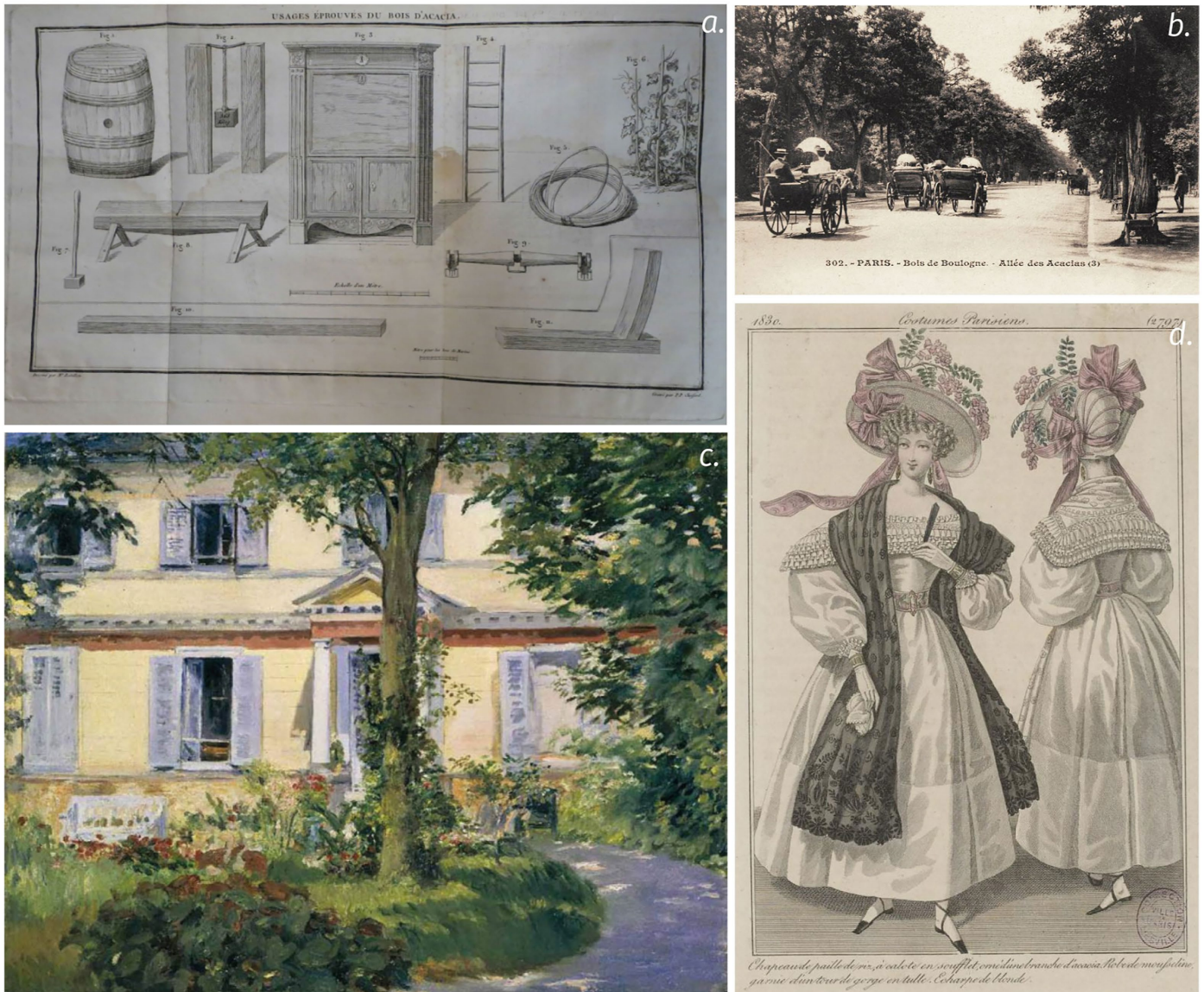
dans un délai minimum des produits rémunérateurs. Mais son rôle ne sera qu’éphémère’.

<sup>53</sup> Fédération des associations agricoles et viticoles de la Côte-d’Or, *La Terre de Bourgogne : La Bourgogne agricole et La Bourgogne rurale réunies*, 18 juillet (1925) 458, Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, 2009-294748.

<sup>54</sup> Recettes de tante Jeanne, *La Mode du jour*, Paris, 2 avril 1925, 10. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Droit, économie, politique, JO-68231, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb328174690>

<sup>55</sup> With a name including the ‘acacia’ string, out of ~2.1 M ways. *Base Adresse Nationale*, Etalab, april 2021, filtered by authors.





**Fig. 2.** Robinia uses in the nineteenth century: a. 'Proven uses of Acacia wood' in Juglar l'Ainé, *Le triomphe de l'Acacia*, Paris, 1808. b. The 'alley of acacias' in the Boulogne woodland (Paris, sixteenth arrondissement) c. Édouard Manet. *La Maison de Rueil*, 1882 (Alte National-Galerie, Berlin). d. 'Parisian costumes: Hat made of rice straw, with a gusseted cap, decorated with an acacia branch' (Anonymous, 1830, Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris, G.16184).

Ultimately, if Black locust was fully integrated into the ambitions of foresters, agriculture and especially viticulture were crucial in its institutionalization as a peasant species in many regions. Daily and agricultural uses ensured a significant role in the rural economy: fuelwood, fences posts, honey production, cattle fodder, toy manufacturing... Multiple outlets meant possible off-season earnings for farmers with 'acacia' plots. Some sources came to assume the groves of the handy species as an integral part of the local 'terroir'.<sup>56</sup> It was notably the case in winemaking regions, where the

socio-technical developments and the crises associated with vineyards both largely contributed to black Locust expansion.<sup>57</sup>

The tree was also appreciated by urban elites. Its white flowers were vehicles of distinction, as they were used in perfumery or adorned ladies' hats of the Louis-Philippe (Fig. 2d) or second Empire fashions. Its wood had premium niche uses such as marquetry, carpentry and luxury car bodywork. Its high densities in the immediate outskirts of

<sup>56</sup> On the shifting meanings of 'terroir', see T. Bassett, C. Blanc-Pamard and J. Boutrais, *Constructing Locality: The terroir Approach in West Africa*, *Africa*, 1 (2007) 104–129.

<sup>57</sup> Z. Ginter and B. Hautdidier, *Upbeat plants in times of forest crisis? On the material and discursive trajectories of black Locust in France*, *UGI Centennial Congress*, Paris, 21 July 2022.

large cities also led to new metonymies, ironically described as soon as in 1851: ‘When nature has unfolded its most luxuriant greenery, the Parisians, great lovers of the countryside, have this singular illusion that they have encountered it as soon as they have crossed the city gates. For them, the countryside is the acacia’.<sup>58</sup> As a matter of fact, the main artery of the Bois de Boulogne, the ‘allée de Longchamp’, was commonly called ‘allée des acacias’ because of its tree alignments (Fig. 2b). It was at the turn of the twentieth century a particularly popular Sunday walk for the Parisian high society. ‘Thronged with the famous beauties of the day’, it appears as a stage of Miss Swann’s mundanities in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of things past*.<sup>59</sup> Other artists, namely poets, writers or painters (Van Gogh, Renoir, Manet—see fig. 2c—, Sisley...), showcased the tree in their works, illustrating its ‘naturalization’ in daily life.

These broad but discreet shifts further took away the ‘acacia’ from a strictly forest tree categorization, as illustrated by this debate excerpt within the *Société Nationale d’Agriculture*: ‘But we are talking about forest woods, forest production, not shrub production of hedgerows, parks, roadsides or walkways. There is here hardly more than domestic use.’<sup>60</sup> Formerly a darling of state planners, black Locust embodied a private forest species.

As the gradual remodeling of French forests towards an industrial economic model was well underway at the turn of the twentieth century, Robinia proponents had also mostly tuned down their optimistic prospects.<sup>61</sup> Yet there were regular attempts to rebrand the species and regenerate its uses. In 1911, the *Société Française d’Agriculture* attributed its

forestry section prize to a monography on black Locust.<sup>62</sup> A dedicated session at the 1913 International Forestry Congress further publicized the Hungarian example, where an aggressive afforestation program of the ‘whole country up to the Middle Mountains’ would soon lead to the highest share of forest cover in Europe.<sup>63</sup> The case was disconcerting for the assembly, especially the French foresters: if the species was productive and scalable there, why should it be contained here to marginal uses? Revolving on the specifics of black Locust plantation (where, how, to what purpose) the debate ended on the compromise of a common resolution: ‘acacia coppices and high forests shall be constituted as a cost-effective afforestation mode, especially on suitable sites’.<sup>64</sup>

As it was already thriving in fallows liberated by rural exodus, black Locust was envisioned by some foresters as a potential beneficiary of more traumatic perturbations: before the end of hostilities, its plantation was suggested in 1917 on the most ravaged of eastern battlegrounds, with the rationale of ‘immediately return[ing] the land to a state of production’.<sup>65</sup> While such proposal had hardly any significant impact, the tree had also been selected in tree nurseries of French colonies (Madagascar, Northern Ivory Coast, Algeria), sometimes as the only temperate species, always with disappointing results.<sup>66</sup> A similar but more successful zeal was increasingly applied to the ‘internal colonization of the country’, where Acacia afforestation was hailed as an option in peripheral rural regions.<sup>67</sup> The hindsight accumulated in metropolitan France on recent climatic events also gave new guarantees of hardiness: a late phenology helped for the harsh 1879 winter, while the 1911 summer drought

<sup>58</sup> ‘Quand la nature a déployé sa plus luxuriante verdure, les Parisiens, grands amateurs de la campagne, se font cette singulière illusion, qu’ils l’ont rencontrée du moment qu’ils ont franchi la barrière. Pour eux la campagne, c’est l’acacia.’ B.R., *Le Guide du promeneur aux barrières et dans les environs de Paris*, Paris, 1851, 129, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l’homme, 8-LK7-7666, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb36396176j>

<sup>59</sup> M. Proust, *Swann’s Way*. London, 1981 [1913], 425.

<sup>60</sup> *Bulletin des séances de la Société Nationale d’agriculture*, compte rendu mensuel, 13 janvier (1904): ‘Mais nous parlons de bois de forêt, de la production forestière, non de la production arbustive des haies, des parcs, des bordures de routes ou d’allées. Il n’y a guère là qu’une utilisation domestique.’

<sup>61</sup> A. Brun, La forêt dans l’économie rurale, *Économie rurale*. 154 (1983) 66–71.

<sup>62</sup> Where in particular, distinctive silvicultural strategies were proposed depending the intended timber uses. G. Vulot, *Le Robinier faux-acacia*, Paris, 1914.

<sup>63</sup> *Congrès Forestier International*, Paris, 1913, 18 June 1913 session, 120 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département Sciences et techniques, 4-S-2893.); B. Keresztesi, Breeding and cultivation of black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, in Hungary, *Forest Ecology and Management*, 3 (1983) 217–244; Vítková, Müllerová, Sádlo, Pergl and Pyšek, Black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) beloved and despised.

<sup>64</sup> *Congrès Forestier International*, 130: ‘Qu’il soit constitué des taillis et des futaies d’acacia comme mode économique de boisement, particulièrement sur les terrains propices’.

<sup>65</sup> A. Jolyet, Le Robinier, *Revue des eaux et forêts*, (1917) 260.

<sup>66</sup> É. Prudhomme, La station agronomique de Nanisana, *Revue des cultures coloniales*, 5th September (1898); M. Bégué, La question forestière en Côte d’Ivoire, *Revue Internationale Des Produits Coloniaux*, november (1935); Le Robinier, *L’Afrique Du Nord Illustrée : Journal Hebdomadaire d’actualités Nord-Africaines : Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc*, 28th April (1928).

<sup>67</sup> Viaud-Bruant, La renaissance de la France par les plantations, *La Vie à la campagne*, 1<sup>st</sup> december (1931).

had also been well endured.<sup>68</sup> But producing wood had then become less of an asset than the general purpose of granting value to infertile lands: reforesting wastelands, replenishing decaying coppices, fixing nitrogen in undeveloped soils... Those framings were more than ever in line with the idea of an ephemeral species, while ‘waiting for better’. Marginalized in larger public reforestation schemes, black Locust could yet be used as an example, if not the paragon, of a successful acclimatization. Considering the case of the American Walnut (*Juglans nigra*), the forester Pourtet later hoped that ‘France could become a second home for this tree, as it did for the black Locust’.<sup>69</sup> This new ethos of the tree as a ‘secondary’ or ‘transition’ species was also a reason for its statistical elusiveness. To the request of a Hungarian forest officer regarding covered areas in France, the administration could unequivocally reply that such data was unavailable: ‘the acacia [...] existing only in a disseminated stage in the French forests and being especially planted by private individuals, for the development of vacant lands or by railways companies to fix slopes’.<sup>70</sup>

In 1946, afforestation dynamics had received a strong boost in France with the advent of a dedicated funding scheme, the *Fond Forestier National*. Explicitly tailored to compensate market inadequacies of French private forests, namely deficits in pulp and paper products, the fund ensured quickly the further dominance of fast-growing softwoods in small-scale plantations.<sup>71</sup> Black Locust had an ambiguous status in these developments. Its alleged profitability somehow avoided its general labelling as ‘unwanted coppices’, synonymous of a targeting for conversion to high-forest.<sup>72</sup> Never

fully left out, it was yet soon restricted to negligible figures in afforestation efforts.

By the mid 1970s, discourses on the under-harvesting of French forests shared the stage with an increasingly systematic criticism of these ‘production’ forests.<sup>73</sup> The framings of ‘invasive alien species’ or ‘pest’ were a more recent construction, culminating in 2007 with the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe identifying *Robinia pseudoacacia* as the ‘most problematic’ invasive species in Europe.<sup>74</sup>

The aforementioned ‘weediness’ had yet long been part of the appeal of the tree, as foresters praised its ecological versatility and its colonizing ability. How did the ‘acacia’ proponents manage to handle what could increasingly be seen as deleterious downsides? As traits such as ‘proliferating’ or ‘unsociable’ had been stated early, a first minimization was a reframing in purely economic terms of usage tradeoffs.<sup>75</sup> Another enduring strategy was to insist on the manageability of the issue. State foresters leant heavily in the debate, as they could then avail themselves of the reluctance they had built towards broadleaf exotics: around 1980, the share of Robinia was twenty-six times lower in the composition of state-owned forests than in private estates.<sup>76</sup> Such pattern enabled the endorsement by the forestry administration of this new influential narrative of black Locust as a threat to forest diversity and especially to ‘native’ species.

The parallel advent of a ‘weed science’ had early influences in France.<sup>77</sup> But while concerns were clearly expressed among environmentalist communities on the consequences

<sup>68</sup> Jolyet, in Congrès Forestier International, 121.

<sup>69</sup> J. Pourtet, Les arboretums du ministère de l’agriculture. Quelques-uns de leurs enseignements forestier, *Revue Forestière Française* 4 (1979) 282.

<sup>70</sup> ‘J’ai l’honneur de vous faire connaître que l’administration des Eaux et forêts ne possède aucune statistique à ce sujet, l’acacia (Robinier pseudo-acacia) n’existant qu’à l’état disséminé dans les forêts française et étant surtout employé sous forme de plantations, par les particuliers, pour la mise en valeur des terrains nus ou par les compagnies de chemins de fer pour la fixation des talus des voies ferrées’. *Archives, Ministère de l’Agriculture, Répertoire des archives de la Direction des Forêts : affaires domaniales et économiques*, 19880470/209.

<sup>71</sup> J.M. Couderc, Forêts ou plantations d’arbres ? *Bulletin de l’Association de Géographes Français* 3 (1988) 227–37; J. Pourtet, L’évolution dans le choix des essences de reboisement, *Revue Forestière Française* (1972) 567–575.

<sup>72</sup> P. Cochet, Un dilemme forestier actuel : investir ou stagner, *Revue Forestière Française* 8–9 (1956) 577.

<sup>73</sup> N. Demesse, A. Persuy and R. Fischer, *France, ta forêt fout le camp !*, Paris, 1976.

<sup>74</sup> A. Cierjacks, I. Kowarik, J. Joshi, S. Hempel, M. Ristow, M. von der Lippe and E. Weber, Biological Flora of the British Isles: *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Journal of Ecology* 6 (2013) 1623–40, Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe, *State Of Europe’s Forests 2007, The MCPFE Report on Sustainable Forest Management in Europe*, Warsaw, 2007, 56–57.

<sup>75</sup> G. de Kirwan, Fertilisation du sol par le robinier, *Journal des viticulteurs & agriculteurs*, 5 septembre (1903) 271–272.

<sup>76</sup> Area data taken from the second national forest inventory (1973–1987). P. Rousseau, L’évolution des forêts françaises métropolitaines d’après les statistiques forestières, *Revue Forestière Française* 1 (1990).

<sup>77</sup> With pioneers such as Wilfred Robbins and Alden Crafts, and the role of Charles Sutherland Elton’s book *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* (1972). C.A. Kull and H. Rangan, The political ecology of weeds: a scalar approach to landscape transformations, in: R.L. Bryant (Ed) *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, Cheltenham, 2015, 487–500.



of black Locust's aforementioned ecological dynamics on pre-forest natural habitats, the characterization as an invasive was not made totally explicit until the mid 2000s.<sup>78</sup> Research results have also come late, such as the demonstration that the tree was more competitive in its secondary range, with higher germination rates resulting likely from human selection.<sup>79</sup>

An intense lobbying in the European parliament, led mostly by Hungarian representatives, helped to avoid the infamous label of 'invasive alien species of Union concern' for *Robinia pseudoacacia*.<sup>80</sup> It was yet identified as a 'proven invasive alien plant' (*espèce exotique envahissante avérée*) by nearly all botanical conservatories in charge of defining regional hierarchical lists for mainland France.<sup>81</sup> While none of these institutional initiatives have legal standings, such inclusion in targeted lists could legitimize and further mainstream specific management strategies. The species has indeed been monitored in protected areas with habitats vulnerable to its encroachment. It was also particularly targeted within the framework of the Natura 2000 programs, sometimes leading to heated debates between environmentalists and foresters on the relevance and feasibility of girdling practices aiming to contain its 'escapist' abilities. So far, the controversy has remained in limited professional circles, far from challenging a naturalization process of four centuries. These debates again illustrate the ambiguity of Robinia's particular status; an invasive alien species, but not like any other. The tree tends to displace benchmarks of normality, leading to a questioning of the categories and automatisms of action.

## ADMIRED, INSTRUMENTALIZED AND MARGINALIZED

Despite the emergence of invasiveness as a public issue, black Locust remains often presented in 2021 as the world's third most important broadleaf reforestation species: the first non-native tree in European forests, it was also widely used in afforestation programs of China and South Korea. As converging evidence suggests it will further expand its secondary range with climate change, it has increasingly been enrolled for adaptation and mitigation potential purposes, be it for devising a resilient mix of species, the promotion of its durable class-IV wood, an infrastructural role as carbon sink or nitrogen-fixing forests.<sup>82</sup>

The prospects remain somewhat nuanced in France. While the Robinia expansion may have increasingly more to do with spontaneous growth than with massive tree planting efforts, the measurement of such recent areal trends is arguably dependent on ongoing improvements in surveying and mapping methods — and a reliable diachronic assessment may thus be out of reach. Figures from the national forest inventory suggest anyway a significant progression of +50% over the past four decades. Be it terms of areas or standing volumes, such dynamics can be put in relation with those of similar species. The 'Acacia' has for example stayed on par with the very specific and identifiable hybrid Poplars. But it has also been outpaced by an exotic softwood such as the Douglas Fir, subject of a very explicit promotion by the industry.<sup>83</sup> The standpoints of most naturalists towards the tree are therein telling: they have come to acknowledge this new pattern by abandoning eradication as

<sup>78</sup> S. Muller (Ed), *Plantes invasives en France: état des connaissances et propositions d'actions*, Collections Patrimoines Naturels (Vol. 62), Paris, 2004.

<sup>79</sup> X. Bouteiller, *A European ecological and evolutive history of black Locust (Robinia pseudoacacia L.)*. unpublished PhD thesis, Bordeaux University, 2018; Cierjacks, Kowarik, Joshi, Hempel, Ristow, von der Lippe and E. Weber, *Biological Flora of the British Isles: Robinia pseudoacacia*.

<sup>80</sup> Regulation (EU) No 1143/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:02014R1143-20191214&from=EN>

<sup>81</sup> The only exceptions being western regions of Brittany and lower Normandy, where *Robinia* sp. was only ranked 'potential invasive' (IP5) in 2021: *Listes d'espèces*: <http://especies-exotiques-envahissantes.fr/base-documentaire/liste-despeces/> last accessed 15 June 2021.

<sup>82</sup> K.C. Straker, L.D. Quinn, T.B. Voigt, D.K. Lee and G.J. Kling, Black Locust as a Bioenergy Feedstock: a Review, *BioEnergy Research* 8 (2015) 1117–1135; A. Quinkenstein and H. Jochheim, Assessing the carbon sequestration potential of poplar and black locust short rotation coppices on mine reclamation sites in Eastern Germany – Model development and application, *Journal of Environmental Management* 168 (2016) 53–66; J.E. Mohan, J.S. Clark and W.H. Schlesinger, Long-Term CO<sub>2</sub> Enrichment of a Forest Ecosystem: Implications for Forest Regeneration and Succession, *Ecological Applications* 4 (2007) 1198–1212.

<sup>83</sup> P. Rousseau, L'évolution des forêts françaises métropolitaines d'après les statistiques forestières; and online results of the 2019 campaign: <https://inventaire-forestier.ign.fr/> Areas: 135 kha around 1980 to an estimate of 203±23 kha over 2015–2019 for *Robinia* sp., 232 to 411±31 for *Pseudotsuga menziesii* (+77%). Standing volumes: +15% in 10 years for *Robinia* (26±4 in 2005–2009 to 30±4 Mm<sup>3</sup> in 2015–2019), +40% for *Pseudotsuga* (93±11 to 120±17 Mm<sup>3</sup>), +10% for *Populus* (30±5 to 33±6 Mm<sup>3</sup>).



an objective, even a distant one.<sup>84</sup> Three factors may have played especially well for black Locust here: a long introduction history of more than four centuries, the existence of strong cultural attachments and uses, and the renewal of positive expectations in the wake of ongoing climate disruptions.

How singular is then the trajectory of *Robinia* forests in this respect? A cursory glance at the evolution of tree names in French texts since the seventeenth century provides interpretive cues. As figure 3 allows comparison of six groups of ngrams in the Google Book French corpus, the peaks in occurrences of *Acacia* and *Robinier/a* can be linked to a periodization of the three identified ethos, and pinpoint similarities with a few emblematic and easily traceable species.

The first aforementioned 'exhortation' ethos around black Locust is readable in the successive phases of growing interest until the early nineteenth century. While *Acacia* first dominates other genera, subsequent trajectories bear a strong similarity with another introduced ornament species such as a horse Chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum* L.). The second 'instrumentalization' ethos finds a strong mooring in the curve of a major component of past softwood afforestation in France: European spruce (*Picea abies*). With a strong drive built mostly after 1880, a clear peak is reached around 1950, followed by a quick drop in interest. The third

'marginalization' ethos is by definition more elusive. By the end of the nineteenth century, mentions of 'Acacia' increasingly referred in French texts to 'actual' acacias. That would include African Acacias, present in the writings of, among others, botanists and colonial foresters, but also Australian wattles, that were in addition subject to acclimatization attempts.<sup>85</sup> Vernacular attachment to black Locust, no matter how persistent, has thus become increasingly dwarfed in writings by Linnean mentions of other species.

In order to ascertain whether the interest was eventually dwindling, a parallel may be found in the path of a 'nourishing' tree sharing similar multipurpose roles with the *Robinier*: the sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa* Mill.). Neatly aligned with 'Acacia' for two centuries, the 'Castanea' curve strongly diverges after 1950, with a massive drop in mentions. This pattern may appear as a strong hint of an institutional disaffection of both trees: mostly managed as coppices by rural smallholders and considered for long as pillars of informal economies, they were progressively neglected in forest-related writings. Factoring in for the usual positivist shortcomings of a limited graphic comparison, the whole *Robinia* introduction history emerges thus again as very peculiar in the French context.

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<sup>84</sup> A. Dutartre, Quelle stratégie de gestion pour le robinier faux-acacia ? *Dossiers de la lettre d'information*, Centre de ressources espèces exotiques envahissantes, 13th november (2017).

<sup>85</sup> The *Acacia* genus once had up to 1500 members, and was divided into five clades in 2005. African species were mostly assigned

to the *Vachellia* and *Senegalia* genera, while the numerous Australian wattles were controversially kept as *Acacia*. Amongst these, *Acacia dealbata* was introduced in 1800-1804 in France, where it was quickly naturalized and appropriated under the name of 'mimosa'. Carruthers, Robin, Hattingh, Kull, Rangan and van Wilgen, A native at home and abroad.

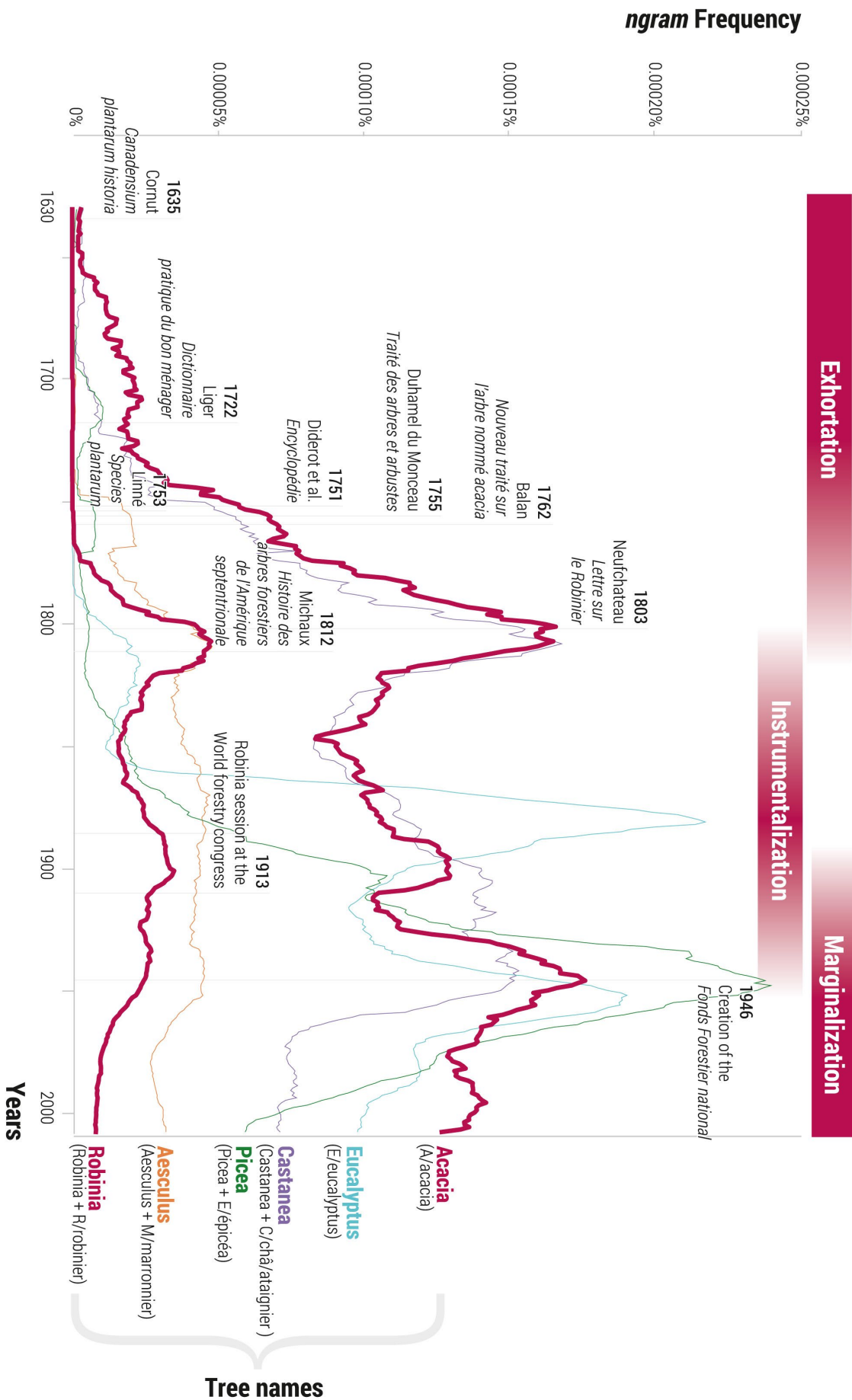


Fig. 3., Ngrams frequencies of six trees (genus or vernacular names) over 1630—2010 in the Google books French Corpus (2019).

## CONCLUSION: THE SHIFTING PLACES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF UNRULY SPECIES AND MARGINAL SPACES

Two factors seem to make the trajectory of black Locust in France — and by extension in western Europe — particularly outstanding:

- (i) a *temps long* of nearly four centuries of introduction and naturalization allowed for the development of several phases of inertia and unnoticed movements, predating the typical narratives of ‘biological invasion’ associated with much shorter timelines;
- (ii) an ability to grapple a wide range of stakes and renewed expectations that no other species in France, introduced or not, have been able to match.

For these reasons, the retelling of such a singular introduction history is able to provide an original lens on the political economies of the regional forest transitions that have occurred over the last centuries in France — and in most countries of Western Europe.

For all the figures that were instrumental in building the ‘Acacia’ trajectory — be it the darling of reforestation policies, the ‘rural symbol’ or the ‘secondary species’ — the reliance on simplified or abridged characterizations of ecological traits was a common thread. But while the expansion of *Robinia* sp. was thus arguably socially engineered and based on willful practices, it also benefitted from more silent material dynamics. The sequential identification of distinctive moments precludes yet neither overlaps nor contradictions. As a result, discursive efforts on the expected and promoted uses of the tree may in a near future be subject to unforeseen reframing.

Marginality can of course be held as a resource in itself, so the ‘peasant species’ dimension might for example become a support for further visibility.<sup>86</sup> In winemaking regions, the dominance of the vineyard post — as a main outlet for the harvesting of black Locust coppices — led to strengthened ties with the industries, and long-term alterations of forest landscapes. These strong patterns of ‘appropriation by use’ eschewed further pushes for standardization while also ratcheting up the ongoing regional naturalization processes. Although the black locust has become entangled in human infrastructure projects, it has not entirely yielded to their control, remaining irreducible to any simple labelling. In many respects, the species has offered some resistance to the ambitions of an industrial and standardized forestry policy. The ‘refractory’, ‘capricious’ or ‘disconcerting’ *Robinia* illustrates how relationships with nature, and its domestication within the framework of its commodification, pose unique challenges in terms of obstacles, opportunities or even unforeseen events.<sup>87</sup> Unruly ‘acacia’ landscapes share relational attributes of marginality that will defy any easy enrollment in prospective developments: functioning aside dominant logics, thriving in interstitial spaces of human influence, they will pursue a trajectory marked by an entanglement of silent material contingencies and purposive changes— themselves possibly oversold.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors warmly thank Christian Kull for his helpful comments on a preliminary version of the text. This work was supported by Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine (BOSCEN-FLUX, grants numbers 2017-1R40111 – 13262 and 13263).

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<sup>86</sup> b. hooks, Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36 (1989) 15–23; G. Grabher, Marginality as strategy: Leveraging peripherality for creativity, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50(8) (2018) 1785-1794.

<sup>87</sup> W. Boyd, S. W. Prudham et R. A. Schurman, Industrial Dynamics and the Problem of Nature, *Society & Natural Resources*, vol. 14, n° 7, (2001), 555–570.