

Editorial 14.1

Heather I. Sullivan

Trinity University, USA

ecozone.associate.editor@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.5096>



Gardening enacts and engages multiple forms of power, both vegetal and human-cultural power. Certainly, creating a garden means tapping into the power of plants that includes both large-scale vegetal beings as well as single-celled photosynthesizing oceanic algae; on all scales, plant power fuels the majority of multicellular living things, including human beings, with food energy and the oxygen that we need to survive. While both gardening and agriculture are human activities working with the green in a manner as if we human beings were the primary shapers of the land, these activities actually reveal our obvious yet all-too-often overlooked dependency on these energy-producing lives; that is, the power relations are often presented backwards in the self-aggrandizing human expressions of working with life-supporting vegetal power. In any case, the power of gardening is not limited to its production of edible life, nor to the fact that plant power takes so many other forms upon which we depend such as the vegetal remnants that we burn for energy: wood, peat, and fossil fuels. In fact, human power often constructs itself with an illusory belief that our minds (easily) dominate matter—especially vegetal matter—even while human power is not only fed by plants but is, in fact, often represented by gardens themselves. These gardens as power can be the religious images of spaces like Eden and the ancient Yggdrasil tree, or the large-scale palace gardens of aesthetic flowers and decorative plants surrounding or within elaborate buildings. Such gardens function as an age-old signal that we have land, time, water, and enough energy to surround our architectural constructions with pleasing and humanly-shaped vegetal beauty that extends as far outwards as our social status allows. But cultural exploitation of gardens extends well beyond palace beauties to include agricultural systems that have exploited in the past, and continue to exploit, other human beings in some of the most brutal forms of human power abuse such as slavery, feudalistic land systems, or the contemporary impoverished crop workers denied decent wages and often citizenship. One should also mention colonial imports of “exotic species” for special gardens and greenhouses as well as the import of colonial plants from one area to another, overwriting ecosystems around the world in the name of profit or even science. Finally, one should not forget the massive power of plants to respond to human activities, as we see with invasive species that cannot be corralled and with herbicide-resistant plants retaking agricultural fields with a destructive fury.

Gardening differs from agriculture, however, since the latter typically evokes much bigger systems of impact. Agricultural efforts to control entire ecosystems require massive amounts of energy and labor and they often feed large human populations to the

detriment of most all life in the area except for the desired human crop. Gardening, in contrast, can also be small, individual, community-driven, and/or a social-justice effort looking to enhance local conditions and peoples. It can be a challenge to the large-scale industrial processes of fossil-fuel based agriculture; gardens can be a system based on collaborative efforts utilizing the powers of local life and local activities. Gardens mean power, but that power can be vegetal and social, and it can feed social resistance and even the recalibration of dominant power structures, especially in the Anthropocene. While some scholars of the Anthropocene consider the beginning of the epoch to be during the late eighteenth-century industrial revolution that amped up the burning of fossil fuels formed primarily from ancient vegetal matter (that eventually leads to industrial agriculture), other scholars locate the Anthropocene's origins already at the very beginnings of human agriculture in the Neolithic. Both arguments relate, however, to transformations of plant-human relationships. Gardening, similarly, is rich in meaning, and may function as a smaller-scale form of agriculture's brutality, colonialism, and human exploitation, or it may offer significant experiences of human-vegetal collaborations that resist the destructive forms of the Anthropocene and produce instead vibrant and powerfully purposeful multi-species alternatives.

In our special section for this volume on "Gardening (against) the Anthropocene," our guest editors Catrin Gersdorf, from the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Germany, and Catriona Sandilands, from York University, Canada, offer wonderful insights into the wide array of possibilities for gardens as forms of resistance found across the world in the Anthropocene. They begin with Jamaica Kincaid's experiences with gardening that document both a personal reflection on flourishing (and withering) plants but also on the colonial control over who can garden, where they have access to land, and what plants they grow. Contextualizing gardening in terms of its "global, colonial origins," Gersdorf and Sandilands note how Kincaid states "the fact that gardening has been, and continues to be, implicated in the political and economic relationships that lie at the core of the Anthropocene, including the often-forced movement of plants and people from place to place and the replacement of complex ecosystems with culturally and ecologically impoverished monocultures." They note that in order to garden "against the Anthropocene," social justice needs to be at the center of the work for sustainability and the "complex biopolitical entanglements" of our lives.

The section features eight impressive articles on gardening from a wide array of places and perspectives. Axel Goodbody links Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761) and Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* (1991) as two instances of "Anthropocene thinking" through gardening. Jordan A. Norviel discusses the Harlem Renaissance poet and activist Anne Spencer, who read and annotated garden and seed catalogues in terms of race. JC Niala documents the creation of a project on the "history of gardens as sites of memorial practice" during the COVID-19 pandemic lock-down in relationship to the use of biocidal technologies alongside allotment gardens in the first World War. Considering Caribbean ecologies, Chiara Lanza writes about the ongoing colonial and racist violence of plantation agriculture, while Maria Sulimma presents a feminist study of urban gardening in the United States as a means of protest that also

disrupts the nature-culture division. Looking at Australia's settler colonialism, Prudence Gibson's critical plant studies essay links Murray Bail's parodic literature to Val Plumwood's ecofeminist work. The collaborators Aubrey Streit Krug, Ellie Irons, and Anna Andersson return us to the United States with a focus on one plant, the yellow-flowering *Silphium integrifolium*, in order to study the small scale of local gardening, conservation and restoration questions and how that local connection interconnects multiple larger "food-energy-water scales," including industrial agriculture. Finally, Serena Ferrando shifts the focus of the essay collection onto the movement between symbolic systems inspired by Emanuele Coccia, that is, how vegetal narratives resist simple translation into human language in Italian plant poetry. This series of essays delivers profound insights into international expressions of gardening as an embodiment of various forms of power, both positive and detrimental, and they reveal gardening's potential to disrupt existing systems of (colonial, capitalist, fossil-fueled) power. The authors and guest editors provide exquisite insights into the shifting human-non-human relations of gardening in the Anthropocene.

The general section presents two essays that also relate to the possibilities of narrating human and non-human relationships in times of massive ecological change and disasters; the first on multispecies communities, and the second on means of portraying ocean acidification as a hyperobject. Aurélie Choné's essay, "L'apport de la littérature à la composition d'un 'monde commun': *Die Wand* de Marlen Haushofer et *Minotaurus* de Friedrich Dürrenmatt," considers these two cold-war stories about catastrophe. Choné describes the changing ecological relationships and the formation of new kinds of communities in terms of "ce que Marielle Macé a appelé la 'grammaire des attachements.'" Despite the fact that both Haushofer and Dürrenmatt write apocalyptic-type narratives, Choné argues that they nevertheless avoid a simple horror of the future. Instead, she sees the "possibility of another world" evoked in the "possibility of another end of the world."

Oriol Batalla turns to art and hyperobject theory as possibilities for representing the strangeness of ocean acidification from within the water in his interdisciplinary contribution, "Ocean Acidification as Hyperobject: Mediating Acidic Milieus in the Anthropocene." Viewing and reading a set of images by Christine Ren from 2018, *Underwater Woman*, Batalla immerses the reader textually into the acidifying ocean waters of the Anthropocene with a new materialist lens. Ren's fascinating images inspire a hermeneutic process of engaging in a new epistemology of altered fluidity. Batalla's mapping of the woman holding a dissolving shell while floating under water insightfully suggests that comprehending the global, non-localized alterations of our ecological systems cannot occur solely through "rationalist" arguments but rather better through the weave of art and intentional articulation of representation. He writes that "the challenges of the Anthropocene are put at the forefront, situating specific events and problematics in a planetary scale. That is, this article aims to contribute to the dismantling of the problematic 'rationalism' by immersing analysis in an underwater and acidic milieu that will expand and reshape ontology, phenomenology and epistemology."

Battala thereby creates a bridge to the Arts section of the volume, edited by Elizabeth Tavella, our arts editor from the University of Chicago. Tavella's comments on the creative contributions offer a marvelous array of connections to the special guest-edited section on "Gardening (against) the Anthropocene" more broadly. Following Anna Tsing's understanding of the Anthropocene as a means towards change, Tavella writes that: "This radical paradigm shift includes rethinking the role given to gardens and their potential to encourage the adoption of a multispecies lens when we enter into a dialogue with landscape." She emphasizes the capacity of gardens to reveal mutual interdependence and to enact forms of "trans-species justice," even while acknowledging that gardens can also be part of ideological power structures. Tavella highlights the fact that "All seven artistic contributions in the current issue challenge, from various angles, the dominant ideologies tied to gardens," particularly with their productive blurring of boundaries such as urban-rural, ethics of design, and as "reciprocal and relational sites."

The first three contributions to the arts section are fascinating photographic essays; the first being Benjamin Vogt's lush images and comments, *Rewilding Suburbia*, which is a proposal to create wild prairie on Nebraska's lawns. Vogt thereby overwrites, literally, on the land, the colonial impulse of English gardens with a rewilding practice that also counters agricultural monocultures. The second photographic essay moves to Europe with the contribution from Agnese Bankovska, who explores three very different garden settings in Helsinki, Finland: "the plantation plots in the Greater Helsinki area, a communal initiative in the industrial district, and the author's own terrace garden in a suburban area." These three gardens offer a "multispecies ethics of care" that reject categories such as the derogatory idea of weeds (that feed pollinators), and to rethink ideas of "invasive" lives. The third photographic essay is from Canada, written by dp patrick in collaboration with "allied calendulas against bulldozers," and chronicling "the vicissitudes of tending to 'The Big Gay Garden' planted as an act of protest during the 2018 union strike at York University, Canada." This garden thrives while transforming earthy labor into a kind of activist strike of slow joy and tactile care.

The arts section then shifts to poetry, opening with Mary Newell's powerful and disturbing poem, *Tongues All Out*, that presents, in Tavella's words, a "world of weather imbalance to meditate on the impacts of climate change on gardens," and features heat, species loss, and the "disruption of interspecies relations." Then, Antonello Borra's evocative bilingual contribution, *Erbario* is, as Tavella writes, "a literary floriculture composed of four short poems in Italian with parallel English text, each one named after a plant: dragon lily, mint, great celandine, and snowdrop." Borra's poems traverse various pungent fragrances, myth, and the dignity of "invasive" weeds. William Bond writes the next poem, "Walnut," about an American black walnut tree, expanding poetic horizons to include knowledge-making of the non-human on multiple scales and of various kinds, including the vegetal and the microscopic. The poem's very shape and sequence maps out the shape and form of a tree's active morphology. The final creative contribution is Elizabeth Bolton's six-part poem on fiddleheads, "a plant native to northeastern Turtle Island (North America) and a traditional food, to remind readers that words and names carry a legacy of meaning that holds potentially harmful consequences." Bolton thereby

questions and reshapes the Linnean heritage of naming, and the colonial appropriation of indigenous plants, recipes, and cultural practices. Indeed, in Tavella's final introductory comments on this marvelous collection of works, she reiterates the need to decolonize gardens and the rich promise of textualizing gardening tropes in the Anthropocene.

Finally, in the book review section edited by Isabel Pérez, this volume of *Ecozon@* also includes an impressive array of seven book reviews/review essays of recent work in the environmental humanities. Katie Ritson contributes a review essay of four edited volumes on oil extraction and petro-narratives, including: *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere* (2021), edited by Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi; *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity* (2021), edited by Caren Irr; *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Cultures* (2021), edited by Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson; and *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (2022), edited by Carola Hein. Pamela Phillips then reviews together Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene* & Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain*, both also appearing in 2021. Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell reviews John Parham's 2021 edited volume, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*. On plants, Stefan Hecht reviews (in German) *Die Pflanzenwelt im Fokus der Environmental Humanities / Le végétal au défi des Humanités environnementales*, edited by Aurélie Choné and Philippe Hamman, conference proceedings from 2021. The final three reviews address different genres and media in the environmental humanities: first is Mònica Tomàs's review of the 2022 volume, *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dedinová. Then, Caroline Granger reviews Cary Wolf's 2022 monograph *Art and Posthumanism: Essays, Encounters, Conversations*; and, finally, Marco Caraciolo provides the concluding review of Tom Tyler's 2022 monograph, *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*.

In closing these editorial comments, the editors of *Ecozon@* would like to acknowledge our concern for the well-being of all the earthquake victims in Turkey and Syria. *Ecozon@* has benefitted immensely from many important and long-term contributions from our friends and colleagues in Turkey. We want to use this platform to recognize all of their work for our journal and their collective ecocritical work more broadly, as well as to express our hopes for Turkey's and Syria's recovery from the earthquake's aftermath.

Gardening (against) the Anthropocene An Introduction

Catrin Gersdorf
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Germany
catrin.gersdorf@uni-wuerzburg.de

Catriona Sandilands
York University, Canada
essandi@yorku.ca

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.5085>



At the beginning of her brilliant, iconoclastic gardening memoir *My Garden (Book)*: Jamaica Kincaid tells two stories that, together, serve as an excellent introduction to the idea of gardening in the Anthropocene. In the first story, she describes the gift that inaugurated her attachment to the garden: “a hoe, a rake, a spade, a fork, some flower seeds to mark the occasion of that thing known as Mother’s Day” (3). With her gifts, Kincaid “went outside and dug up a large part of the small yard, a patch that had never been cultivated, and put all seeds in the packets in the ground” (3). The results were disappointing, “for nothing grew, the ground was improperly prepared, it was in the shade of a big oak tree and a big maple tree” (4). Kincaid’s first venture into gardening became even more disappointing when she learned that the tomato plants her neighbor grew not only thrived but also bore fruit that “tasted most delicious” (4) despite fact that they were exposed to the toxins from the building materials of the neighbor’s house.

In the second story, Kincaid describes another garden she began some years later, in which she hired a neighbor to dig up strange, irregular patches of soil for new beds “so that the house would eventually seem to be protected by a moat made not of water but the result of an enthusiastic beginning familiarity with horticulture” (6). She was reading a book on the conquest of Mexico at the time, finding in the process references to marigolds and dahlias and zinnias, and it eventually dawned on her that the shapes she wanted to make in the garden “resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it” (8). For Kincaid, the epiphany served as a moment of embodied remembrance that connected her Vermont garden to her Antiguan past and to the conquest of Mexico, including the colonial plunder of its plants.

On one hand, Kincaid’s self-critical reflection of her first steps into the practice of gardening expose some of the major problems of life in the Anthropocene, an epoch that bears the mark of the human, or rather, of capitalist modernity’s reliance on the logics of science, technology, consumerism, colonialism, and the market. For that which seems to be in a state of nature (the patch in the back yard that had never been cultivated) does not bring seeds to germinate and grow into plants while that which grows in the vicinity of

poisonous toxins (the very signature of modernity's failure to understand the principles of healthy ecologies) grows into deceptively tasteful food. The story also shows the ignorance of modern humans when it comes to basic knowledge about plants and the environmental conditions they need to flourish, while at the same time it highlights the joy and emotional enthusiasm that is generated by the very prospect of working the soil and cultivating beauty and nourishment.

On the other hand, Kincaid's observation that her garden is a site of embodied memory with global, colonial origins and resonances highlights the fact that gardening has been, and continues to be, implicated in the political and economic relationships that lie at the core of the Anthropocene, including the often-forced movement of plants and people from place to place and the replacement of complex ecosystems with culturally and ecologically impoverished monocultures. Although we would qualify that a garden is not necessarily a plantation in Anna Tsing's sense of the Plantationocene (Haraway and Tsing), it would be naïve not to remember—as Kincaid clearly does—that gardens have been instruments of colonization and recipients of plunder, that local horticultural practices are enmeshed in relations of international trade and migration, and that the idea of the garden as an Edenic space that exists outside global political ecologies is clearly now, and has been for at least hundreds of years, a considerable, and often willful, misrepresentation.

Following Kincaid, we consider that gardening *in* the Anthropocene means we need to acknowledge and work within the histories that have generated the political, ecological, economic, and social crises we are confronted with in the twenty-first century, histories in which gardens can be themselves implicated as sites of colonial, capitalist activity. We understand, then, that gardening *against* the Anthropocene means we need to place relations of justice at the center of our work alongside those of environmental sustainability. Gardening *in and against* the Anthropocene asks us to remember that gardens embody and enact complex biopolitical entanglements; to attend to the ways gardens have, both historically and in the present, been sites of contestation and resistance; and to imagine how gardens can be generative of more just and equitable futures, including more attentive and respectful relations with the natural world. And, of course, gardening can involve the cultivation of flourishing, joy and abundance in the active company of others, both human and more-than-human: in this sense, perhaps gardening can be understood as a potentially prefigurative practice to help take us *out of* the Anthropocene.

This issue of *Ecozon@* includes eight articles that begin from specific places, texts, and practices to ask how gardens are implicated in different Anthropocenic histories; how gardens thread through literary texts, performing complex symbolic work in relation to their larger social and ecological contexts; how gardens are rich sites of multispecies practice that bridge art, philosophy, science, and craft; and how gardening, done well, can contribute to reparative, restorative, and/or decolonial forms of more-than-human world-making.

In the article "Gardening the Planet: Literature and the Reimagining of Human/Nature Relations for the Anthropocene," ecocritical scholar Axel Goodbody reads

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761) and Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* (1991), a collection of autobiographical essays about gardening, as texts which, although separated by genre conventions, language, history, and geography, are connected through their representation of horticultural practices as modes that may help "humanity ... to survive in the Anthropocene." For Goodbody, garden literature—a term by which he means both prose fiction and nonfiction garden writing produced in Europe and North America—can be understood as an archive of "Anthropocene thinking." Independent of genre or historical location, garden literature is presented as a tool for tracing the complicated history of "the quest for a sustainable form of [human] interaction with the natural environment." From the pages of Goodbody's contribution, the garden emerges as a place and a space created and inhabited by *Homo hortensis*, a paradoxical figure that represents Western culture's proclivity of control and mastery as well as the desire to find better, more sustainable ways of living from and with nature. This horticultural paradox—the desire for control and mastery on the one hand, and for coproduction and coexistence on the other—is one constituent of the political dimension of the garden, and of gardening in (and against) the Anthropocene.

An equally political component of gardening is investigated in literary scholar Jordan A. Norviel's essay on Harlem Renaissance poet and activist Anne Spencer (1882 – 1975). The daughter of former slaves, Spencer has not received much scholarly attention but nevertheless, was a vital actor in the intellectual, literary, and artistic community of the Harlem Renaissance. In her garden and home in Lynchburg, Virginia, she hosted such prominent figures as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, thus providing a "location of [Black] social and intellectual life" amidst the discriminatory reality of the Jim Crow South. By taking Spencer's reading (and annotation) of garden and seed catalogues as seriously as her perusal of Browning, Housman, and Whitman, Norviel is able to demonstrate that this Harlem Renaissance poet ultimately invites her readers "to think of ecology [as] existing in the permeability of the social, lyrical, and botanical spaces." From Norviel's readings, Spencer emerges as an Anthropocene poet *avant la lettre* and an ecological thinker whose work as both a poet and a gardener requires her to continuously respond to the history of oppression and racism inscribed in the botanical nomenclature and cultural history of gardening. More than just a refuge in a world torn by the cultural and physical violence of anti-black racism, Spencer's garden "served as connective tissue between Virginia and Harlem, rupturing the stability of a singular, isolated landscape." By highlighting the proximity of Spencer's poetic and horticultural interests, Norviel contributes to the work of uncovering the ecological foundation of the Harlem Renaissance.

In "(Re)creating a Living Memorial: Urban Gardening as a More-than-Human Co-creating Practice," artist-scholar JC Niala reflects on a work she created during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic that employed a garden-plot near Oxford, U.K., to remember and perform unrecognized, embodied connections between the current pandemic and the so-called Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. Noting, poignantly, that "we ask a lot of gardens, both practically and in our imaginations," she considers in her reflection both larger histories of gardens as sites of memorial practice and the specific dynamics of embodied

memory involved in her project, *1918 Allotment*. In the work, Niala created a small vegetable garden in the style of early twentieth-century allotment gardens such as the ones promoted in the *Dig for DORA* (Defence of the Realm Act) campaign during the First World War. Using T.W. Sanders' 1918 manual *Kitchen Garden and Allotment*, she planted the "King Edward potatoes, cabbage, broccoli, onion, peas, radish, runner bean, kale, and turnip" that he recommended, at the same time reflecting on his language—e.g., "vegetal foes"—and the practices he advocated, such as the production and use of blood meal, in the context of the war-wrought antagonisms, the killing fields, the land enclosures, and—perhaps especially—the biocidal technologies that emerged from the war such as DDT. As Niala describes, the *1918 Allotment* project enabled conversations with visitors to the garden that entwined the two pan/epidemics in important ways; that connected them to technologies of war, experiences of loss, and legacies of violence; and that reminded them of their personal relationships to place and history. In both the garden and her shared poetic reflections on it, Niala reminds us about the importance of the relationship between gardens and memory, and also of the particular importance of soil as a medium of memory, both human and interspecies.

In "*Le Jardin d'Allah: Ecological Sensibilities in the Francophone Caribbean*," multidisciplinary scholar Chiara Lanza mobilizes post-colonial theory and agroecological concepts of human-soil relations for a reading of Maryse Condé's novel *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* (2010; Engl. Trans. *Waiting for the Waters to Rise*, 2021). Gardens and landscapes are not at the center of the stories told in the novel. Yet by focussing her analysis on Movar, one of the novel's protagonists who keeps a small garden patch in his backyard, Lanza shows that close critical attention to otherwise inconspicuous aspects of a novel may reveal the ecological undercurrents of its narrative, while at the same time positioning human stories within the extended "timescapes of nature." As Lanza argues, Caribbean ecologies are obvious examples of the "double fracture" characteristic of the Anthropocene—he intertwined environmental and social violences of colonization and structural racism—including the impoverishment of the soil that is the ongoing legacy of plantation agriculture. In this ongoing history, gardens, and especially the "provision grounds" in which enslaved people were forced to grow their own food, often served as spaces of cultural resistance and resurgence; these gardens, "at the same time physically within and imaginatively beyond the controlled plantation boundaries," are now places of relatively greater biodiversity and soil health. As Lanza demonstrates, in a similar manner "Movar's acts of gardening and kinship-making perform a healing function" in the context of contemporary turmoil and displacement in the region, including the threat of rising sea levels. These acts cultivate more-than-human intimacies and entanglements and, especially, they highlight the agencies of vegetal actors in gardens that, in Movar's case, might continue to do healing work even after his tragic and violent death. As Lanza concludes, "through the character of Movar, Condé shows that literature can be both aesthetically pleasing and ecologically aware": like a provision garden in the midst of mass plantation enslavement, the story of Movar's small patch of healing serves as a space of resistant possibility against the Anthropocene.

Gardening practices are at the center of the texts analysed in the contribution by

Americanist Maria Sulimma. In recent years, urban gardening has been approached as a practice that disrupts the division between nature and culture, city and countryside. As guerrilla gardening, urban gardening is still perceived as a form of political protest and civil disobedience to spatial practices that privilege the individual interests of private investors over the common interests of communities in livable neighborhoods. In “I am not by any stretch a gardener, just curious’: Feminist Gentrifier Memoirs and an Ethics of Urban Gardening,” Sulimma draws on Vikki Warner’s *Tenemental* (2018) and Anne Elizabeth Moore’s *Gentrifier* (2021), two examples of nonfiction garden writing that address the ethical contradictions as well as the emotional dilemma experienced by two feminists who, in spite of their dedication to the causes of equality and justice, cannot completely avoid to become instrumental in processes of green gentrification. Yet Sulimma also demonstrates that their critical self-awareness “is a necessary first step for combatting” the ill-effects of gentrification. Nevertheless, as Sulimma argues, “at its core, the feminist gentrifier memoir is a paradoxical text,” one that represents the garden and gardening as frameworks for “improvised moments of connectedness” and for building “informal networks of neighborly care” but that ultimately fails to realize “the potential for anti-gentrification activism.”

In “Gardening (against) the Anthropocene: Sustainable Counter-Narratives to Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus*,” feminist critical plant studies scholar Prudence Gibson turns to a novel that has long been read as a parodic response to the ecological devastation caused by settler colonialism on the Australian continent. Reading it a second time twenty-four years after it was first published in 1998, Gibson “detected an absence of decolonial context in the book ... and an unintended reinforcement of misogyny that requires fresh interrogation.” In her essay, Gibson brings Bail’s novel into dialogue with the work of Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood and with an art project conducted by the Dirt Witches, a collective of artists and writers, in Sydney in 2021, which involved the planting of a permanent urban forest. Writing as a member of the Dirt Witches, Gibson reads Bail’s use of parody as a form of ethical nonchalance, asking whether “he uses a parodic tone to relieve himself of authorial responsibility, and instead to recolonise and re-objectify the trees, as assets, as objects of curious interest.” Becoming aware of the possible pitfalls of Bail’s well-intentioned novelistic critique of the Anthropocene, Gibson then shares with her readers how this critical re-reading of a literary text informed the creation of the Dirt Witches’ urban gardening project. In particular, she emphasizes the project’s insistence on concrete strategies of decolonization, including extensive consultation with First Nations and acknowledgement of their prior cultural knowledge of sustainable scrublands and, especially, an emphatic understanding that the urban forest they created in the project was – in counterpoint to Bail—“an artwork (constructed, conceptual and synthetic) not a re-wilding.”

In “Sensing Scale in Experimental Gardens: Un-Lawning with Silphium Civic Science,” multidisciplinary authors and collaborators Aubrey Streit Krug, Ellie Irons and Anna Andersson begin with a single plant, indigenous to the middle part of what is now the United States, and reflect on how a local, interdisciplinary civic science/gardening project both embodied and intervened in multiple scales of Anthropocenic social and

ecological relationship. The yellow-flowering *Silphium integrifolium*, also known by many other names, inspired a collective gardening experiment in which participants were “invited to plant, care for, and study garden-scale plots of different silphium ecotypes” in order to conserve locally-adapted populations of the species and consider the plant’s role in future projects of conservation, restoration, and domestication in the region. As part of the project, Irons developed a video “silphium story” that catalyzed, in conversation with Timothy Clark’s observations about the importance of “scale framing” to Anthropocenic interventions, the authors’ consideration of how a small project about silphium gardening might also underscore much larger “questions of how humans collectively relate to the larger living Earth systems or ecosphere in which we are embedded.” In their analysis, the video, “Un-Lawning with Silphium,” reveals and develops the importance of thinking about gardening as not only a *multispecies*, but also a *multi-scalar* practice, including personal relationships between human and plant bodies; garden-scale relationships involving multiple communities and neighborhoods in their different commitments to the land; lawn-scale relationships that speak of the pervasive influence of settler-colonial and industrial relations on the landscapes in which the silphium experiments took place; and food-energy-water scales that bring questions of biogeochemical relationships into play, including industrial agriculture and its dependence on fossil fuels but also including the petrochemical relations that support even the most environmentally-aware, local biodiversity projects. The authors conclude that scale-framing highlights the potential contradictions involved in gardening in and against the Anthropocene, and “offer a framework to visualize and support experimental engagement with nested and cross-scalar relationships in gardening projects.”

In “Gardening the Symbiocene: Andrea Zanzotto’s and Daria Menicanti’s Poetic Hospitality,” environmental humanities scholar Serena Ferrando takes up recent ecocritical calls to explore how writing can stage new relations between human and nonhuman, both in the garden and more broadly. Specifically, she considers how the works of the two Italian poets “employ vegetal and elemental narratives that ... resist translation into the language of humans and stage encounters among living beings that offer a new way forward.” Drawing inspiration from the burgeoning scholarship in critical plant studies on vegetal liveliness, and especially from Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia’s 2018 book *La Vita Delle Piante* that envisions a new cosmology based on the interpenetrating life-worlds of plants, she explores how vegetal ontologies of permeability, fluidity, and immersion find articulate expression in the two poets’ works. Although Zanzotto’s expansive, experimental texts are far better known than Menicanti’s more classical and contained poetry, Ferrando places them in conversation to consider how their language and imagery intertwine to produce poems that “take us back to our life by making the vegetal world prominent and showing the deep and complex entanglements of bodies, language, and earth.” As she demonstrates through close reading, Zanzotto’s strategy is to “plunge[...] us into the landscape with a disorienting, overwhelming poetic experience that is meant to capture the entirety of the life of the territory and its vegetal presence, which overflows the limits of human language.” In contrast, Menicanti’s works are “meticulously arranged forms [that] contain within them

a sense of the marvelous, so much so that her books may be labeled herbaria and bestiaries.” In their shared vegetal attentiveness, however, both poets draw into palpable presence a “poetic hospitality” that invites conversation between human and vegetal worlds, toward an experience of the present moment as *Symbiocene*—connected, proximate, collaborative—rather than human-dominant Anthropocene.

Finally, in the arts section of the issue, we are pleased to present both a wealth of poetic ruminations on plants and gardening and a triptych of photographic essays. In these essays, Benjamin Vogt, Agnese Bankovska and dp patrick offer important, place-based images and reflections about the work gardens perform in diverse, Anthropocenic moments. Vogt’s focus is on landscapes of the suburban, United States midwest and how *rewilding*—planting and tending native species instead of lawns and carefully attending to what happens as a result—can contribute to an enriched sense of place. Bankovska’s work considers different kinds of gardening in and around Helsinki, Finland, and the ways gardeners make sense of multispecies relationships amid their desires for food production. Patrick’s reflection on a garden planted in the middle of a bitter labor dispute in Toronto, Canada, demonstrates how gardening can serve as a reminder of relationships and temporalities that lie askance to political conflict. Especially when read together, these photo-essays demonstrate the polyvalence of gardens and, in particular, their significant contributions to embodied, place-specific conversations and conflicts about past, present, and future socio-ecological imaginaries.

Works Cited

- Haraway, Donna and Anna Tsing (moderated by Gregg Mittman). *Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation*. U of Wisconsin-Madison: *Edge Effects Magazine*, 2019. https://monoskop.org/images/f/fd/Reflections_on_the_Plantationocene_A_Conversation_with_Donna_Haraway_and_Anna_Tsing_2019.pdf
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (Book)*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Gardening the Planet: Literature and the Reimagining of Human/Nature Relations for the Anthropocene

Axel Goodbody
University of Bath, UK
mlsahg@bath.ac.uk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4877>



Abstract

Gardening as an activity characterised by attentiveness to nature and willingness to adapt to and care for it, and the idea of gardening the planet have attracted recent interest in the context of debates on the Anthropocene. Following an introduction which explains how the Anthropocene challenges the traditional binary division between nature and culture, this article sketches an overview of historical conceptions of the 'natural' garden which anticipated aspects of contemporary thinking on *homo hortensis* (Astrid Schwarz), i.e. humanity as an integral part of nature, dwelling actively in it and enhancing it rather than consuming or destroying it. The second, longer part of the article argues that garden literature, initially in the form of prose fiction, and latterly in that of autobiographically framed essays describing the author's experiences in garden-making and reflecting on their wider implications, have contributed to the reimagining of human/nature relations which the Anthropocene demands. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761) is examined as Early Anthropocene novel which anticipated aspects of Anthropocene thinking which find more explicit formulation in Michael Pollan's work of nonfiction garden writing, *Second Nature* (1991).

Keywords: human/nature relations, the Anthropocene, garden literature, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michael Pollan.

Resumen

La jardinería, como actividad caracterizada por la atención a la naturaleza y la voluntad de adaptarse a ella y cuidarla, y la idea de cultivar un jardín para el planeta han suscitado recientemente un creciente interés en el contexto de los debates sobre el Antropoceno. Tras una introducción en la que se explica cómo el Antropoceno desafía la concepción tradicional de una división binaria entre naturaleza y cultura, este artículo comienza con una visión general de las concepciones históricas del jardín "natural" que anticipan aspectos del pensamiento contemporáneo sobre el *homo hortensis* (Astrid Schwarz), es decir, la humanidad como parte integrante de la naturaleza, que habita activamente en ella y la mejora en lugar de consumirla o destruirla. En la segunda parte del artículo se argumenta que la literatura sobre jardines, inicialmente en forma de prosa de ficción y, más tarde, en forma de ensayo autobiográfico en el que se describen las experiencias del autor en la creación de jardines, reflexionando sobre las implicaciones más amplias de la creación de jardines, ha contribuido a la reimaginación de las relaciones entre el ser humano y la naturaleza que exige el Antropoceno. *Julie o la nueva Heloísa* (1761), de Jean-Jacques Rousseau se examina como novela del Antropoceno temprano que anticipa aspectos del pensamiento antropocénico que encuentran una formulación más explícita en la obra de no ficción sobre jardinería de Michael Pollan, *Segunda naturaleza* (1991).

Palabras clave: la literatura de jardinería, relaciones humano/naturaleza, Antropoceno, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michael Pollan.

The Anthropocene has become a familiar concept in humanities research over the last fifteen years. Proposed by the Dutch meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the American limnologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000 as the scientific name for the most recent period in Earth's history, in which human activities have impacted on the environment enough to constitute a distinct geological change, it has come to stand for the story of humans' changing relationship with the natural world.¹ More precisely, Anthropocene discourse consists of a bundle of competing stories of how we became geophysical agents capable of raising global temperatures, changing the very physical makeup of the planet and causing the sixth mass extinction of species, and of how this development will play out in the lives of future generations. Anthropocene scholarship in the natural sciences has been primarily concerned with defining the characteristics of the new age and deciding when it began. Crutzen and Stoermer initially conceived it as the age of fossil fuels, use of fertilisers in agriculture, and the rise of capitalism and globalisation, which began with the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century (17). The dawning of the nuclear age after the Second World War, when atom bombs and tests were followed by a spike in nuclear fallout and the Great Acceleration of global economic activity led to a significant increase of CO₂ emissions, has since become the preferred start date, but the beginning of agriculture and human settlement at the end of the last Ice Age, when human activities first altered the climate on a local scale has also been considered, and the geological marker defining the epoch remains to be agreed, and a minority of scientists have argued for multiple beginnings rather than a single moment of origin.² For all these dates, the Anthropocene is defined by a rise in the dominance of human species on Earth in terms of population growth, land use and consumption, accompanied by biodiversity loss, an increase in carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere, and global warming. This has given rise to a body of research into Early Anthropocene discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as studies of twentieth and twenty-first-century writing.

Anthropocene debates have prompted humanities scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Donna Haraway to submit to critical scrutiny the human/nonhuman binary which is central to dominant western attitudes, and rethink the divisions between human and natural histories. Humans are increasingly regarded as an integral part of ecosystems, acting on them, but simultaneously being acted upon by nonhuman agents. In a time when nature untouched by human hand has almost ceased to exist, wilderness preservation, which was a key goal of the environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s, has gradually been superseded by a paradigm of managed nature. The different understandings of how much and what kind of human intervention in the natural environment this should entail have given rise to heated debates,³ but in this context the notion of gardening the planet has attracted growing interest.

¹ See in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential article, "The Climate of History: Four Theses."

² See Subramanian, "Anthropocene now: influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch."

³ See for instance Reynolds, "Earth system interventions as technologies of the Anthropocene."

Humanities work on the Anthropocene has been largely conducted through examination of philosophical, political and scientific writing,⁴ but it has also taken place in critical analyses of literary texts and artistic works which give insight into understandings of our relationship with nature. In the first part of this essay, I sketch an overview of historical conceptions of the 'natural' garden which anticipated key aspects of contemporary thinking on humanity as an integral part of nature, dwelling actively in it and enhancing it rather than consuming or destroying it. The second, longer part of the essay argues that writing on gardens, initially in the form of prose fiction, and later in that of autobiographically framed essays describing the author's experiences in garden-making and reflecting on their wider implications, have participated in and contributed to the reimagining of human/nature relations which the Anthropocene demands. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761) is examined as an Early Anthropocene novel which anticipated through its depiction of Julie's garden Michael Pollan's thinking on gardening as the quest for a sustainable form of interaction with the natural environment which, while meeting genuine human needs, makes a positive contribution to the biosphere rather than merely consuming it, in his work of nonfiction garden writing, *Second Nature* (1991).⁵

Conceptions of the 'Natural' Garden and Gardening in the Anthropocene

Gardening, or rather, a particular kind of gardening characterised by attentiveness to nature, willingness to adapt to it and care for it, conducted in a spirit of co-production rather than imposition of human will, has become a model for the relationship with global nature which we should work toward if humanity is to survive in the Anthropocene. There are widely differing conceptions of gardening in the Anthropocene, but before outlining some of the principal ones it is worth noting that they were prefigured by notions of the 'natural' garden. Elements of the natural garden were already present in the principles underlying the eighteenth-century English landscape garden, others came to the fore in the fashion for 'wild' gardens toward the end of the nineteenth century, the early twentieth-century German 'nature garden,' and in the 'Le Roy Garden' in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶ There is of course also a link with understandings and representations of that most primal of gardens, the Garden of Eden.

The English landscape garden style which emerged in the early eighteenth century and spread across Europe, succeeding the more formal, symmetrical 'French' garden, aimed to create an appearance of naturalness, by replacing the elaborate geometrically-

⁴ See for instance Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*.

⁵ I thank Ecozon@'s two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions for improvements to an earlier version of this article.

⁶ 'Natural garden' is the term used by Peter Harper in a pioneering working manual of natural gardening methods (Peter Harper, Chris Madsen and Jeremy Light. *The Natural Garden Book: Gardening in Harmony with Nature*. Gaia Books, 1994) and by the prominent garden designers and theorists Piet Oudolf, Henk Gerritsen and Noel Kingsbury. It is also the label used by the garden historian Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, whose edited book *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1997) provides a useful historical overview.

patterned flowerbeds in Baroque gardens with less formal planting in flowing shapes, clumps of shrubs and trees, and serpentine bodies of water. Hahas (dry-ditch-and-wall combinations creating a barrier to keep animals out while preserving an uninterrupted view of the land beyond) gave the impression that the garden was one with the wider pastoral landscape. The designers of classical landscape, picturesque and Gothic gardens arranged nature into 'scenes' to be viewed and interpreted from specific vantage points, through conscious composition of hills, trees, rocks and waterfalls. However, this was still understood as working *with* rather than *against* nature. At the same time, the landscape garden was theorised as a space in which the individual could experience freedom, and associated with a liberal and egalitarian political agenda.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the vogue for naturalness returned in the forms of the 'wild' and 'cottage' garden, which were popularised by William Robinson in his books, *The Wild Garden* (1870) and *The English Flower Garden* (1883), and the Arts and Crafts garden (characterised by the movement's preference for simplicity and the vernacular), of which Gertrude Jekyll was the most celebrated proponent. With their revival of old-fashioned native perennials such as snowdrops, wild roses, foxgloves and columbines, staggered arrangement of hardy plants in herbaceous borders, integration of fruit bushes and vegetable beds, and climbing roses in trees and wildflower meadows, trendsetting gardeners sought to recreate a countryside which was imagined to be pure, stable and moral, as a recuperative sanctuary from the perceived ills of urban society.

In the years before the First World War this naturalistic English garden style was taken up and developed further in Germany by Willy Lange, Professor of Garden Design in Berlin. In Lange's 'Naturgarten,' a proto-ecological desire to preserve endangered species converged with Goethean pantheism and a wish to celebrate German cultural identity. The ideas of Robinson and Lange were taken up in America by champions of the 'prairie garden,' who worked to preserve endangered native plants and restore a vanishing American landscape. The promotion of native landscapes which the Danish-American landscape architect Jens Jensen advocated was, like that of Lange, ideologically problematic, because of its association with racially defined nationalism. However, Jensen's use of native grasses and wildflowers from the rapidly vanishing prairies, assembled in naturalistic settings, led to restoration projects across the United States which served to conserve biodiversity and benefited wildlife.

One of the most radical departures in garden design in the second half of the twentieth century was the work of the Dutchman Louis Le Roy. Le Roy conceived his public parks and gardens as responses to the impoverishment of modern urban life as well as environmental degradation. He gave the community a central role in planning, while permitting plants and trees to grow freely. The Le Roy Garden anticipated Anthropocene gardening by aiming to provide spaces where vegetation could develop to maturity and humans could meet their genuine needs, through mutual participation of humans, plants and animals. Although this kind of garden was too unkempt and jungle-

like to please the general public, Le Roy's ideas inspired a generation of community garden projects in the Netherlands and Germany.⁷

Today, responsible stewardship of nature, maintenance of natural fertility and the provision of habitats for wildlife are widely accepted as key factors of the gardening ethic. In the Anthropocene, culture can no longer be pitted against nature, but must work with it. Certainly, we need wild places as refuges for our nonhuman fellow creatures, and perhaps also to enable encounters with phenomena which remind us that there are limits to our control of the planet. However, experiencing wildness is not the only way of decentring the human. Thinkers in disciplines from Landscape Architecture to Geography, Anthropology and Philosophy have reflected on the features that distinguish what Astrid Schwarz has called *Homo hortensis* from the more familiar *Homo faber*.⁸ *Homo faber* is modern man, the fabricator who creates tools to act in the world. Ingenuity and productivity are his core values. In contrast, *Homo hortensis* signifies a humankind in the garden—working in it, deriving pleasure from it, and leading a life guided by the principles of gardening.

Approaches to gardening have always varied enormously, ranging from following the principle of command and control and imposing rigid human order on nature at one extreme, to allowing nature maximum freedom to develop and change at the other, merely nudging it gently into a more pleasing or productive form. Different theories of gardening in and for the Anthropocene have similarly been expounded.

Hydroponics and hydroculture are practical examples of the techno-scientific approach to Anthropocene gardening, but equally large-scale flagship initiatives such as the Eden Project in Cornwall and the 'Gardens by the Bay' in Singapore. The Eden Project, which opened in 2000, is, with its enormous geodesic domes, recycling of water and renewable energy, as much an engineering achievement as a garden. Even more so the Singaporean Gardens by the Bay, whose Supertree Grove consists of tree-like structures between 25 and 50 metres tall. Home to enclaves of ferns, vines, orchids and bromeliads, these collect rainwater for use in irrigation and fountain displays, and are fitted with photovoltaic cells that harness solar energy which is used for lighting.

In this high-tech understanding, gardening in the Anthropocene is essentially a matter of adapting to climate change and using technology to mitigate it. However, garden theorists and landscape architects tend to favour a gentler approach which is more accommodating to existing natural ecosystems and processes and less interventionist. Conservation plays a role in it, but the aim is less to restore nature to a supposedly original state than to maintain and improve its resilience.

The Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has written about gardening in this vein as a practice of interaction with nature characterised by intimacy with and care for places, and partnership with nonhumans as well as other humans. European settlers in Australia introduced plants from home and sought to recreate an aesthetic familiar to them. Since the 1970s, there has, however, been a reaction against

⁷ See Boukema and McIntyre, editors. *Louis G. Le Roy*.

⁸ See Schwarz, "From *Homo faber* to *Homo hortensis*. Gardening techniques in the Anthropocene."

this, calling for the exclusive use of native plants. Plumwood rejects this purist approach, and argues for what she calls an ‘adaptive’ garden. “In place of an aesthetic of national or local purity, I suggest, we need a critical, ecological, interspecies and place-sensitive ethics of gardening as our guide,” she writes (par. 13).

The principles of sensitivity towards nature and negotiation between natural systems and human needs which are at the heart of Plumwood’s conception of the ‘adaptive’ garden, and central to gardening in the Anthropocene, are also present in the thinking of the French landscape architect and garden theorist Gilles Clément. Clément is a leading advocate of the notion that gardens should be permitted to change over time. With the *Garden in Movement*, located in central France, Clément abandoned the attempt to maintain a fixed design. Recognising that plants are “vagabond,” he accepted “seeing them escape or establish themselves: invade the ground, mark the landscape to the extent of giving it their signature. Giving it a supplementary identity” (Clément 162). Willingness to accept this tempering of human choice with chance as a matter of playful design rather than entropic disorder is a key principle of the *Garden in Movement*. Clément also popularised the phrase “planetary gardening” (132). We should think of the entire planet as a garden, he argues, and of ourselves as its keepers, responsible for care of the totality of life, including animals as well as plants. His “humanist” ecology proposes a relationship between humans and nature in which the gardener “acts locally on behalf of and in awareness of the planet” (64). Clément’s idea of gardening the planet was taken up by the popular American environmental nonfiction writer and climate justice activist Emma Marris in her book *The Rambunctious Garden. Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World* (2011). “We are already running the whole earth, whether we admit it or not,” Marris writes:

To run it consciously and effectively, we must admit our role and even embrace it. We must temper our romantic notion of untrammelled wilderness and find room next to it for the more nuanced notion of a global, half-wild rambunctious garden, tended by us. [...] Rambunctious gardening is proactive and optimistic; it creates more and more nature as it goes, rather than just building walls around the nature we have left. (2-3)

I have presented these examples from the history of garden design and the writing of philosophers, landscape architects and environmentalists to show how the integration of human individuals and collectives in the wider community of plants and animals and other principles of Anthropocene gardening such as tolerance of a degree of disorder, the embedding of the garden in the landscape, the inclusion of fruit trees and vegetable plots throughout ornamental gardens, low maintenance planting with perennials and accommodation to local conditions and naturally occurring plant communities have been anticipated in earlier centuries in gardening theory and practice, while others again such as concern for biodiversity and the preservation of heritage varieties, readiness to adapt to natural change and community-oriented gardening have been developed more recently in response to recognition of the global scale of human impact on the environment. In the following I explore the contribution which the literature of gardening has made to this re-imagining of human/nature relations for the Anthropocene, again asking to what extent older texts have anticipated recent Anthropocene thinking. First, I ask what forms it has

taken, and how it has come to serve as a medium for reflecting on the human/nature relationship.

Garden Fiction and Garden Writing

Garden literature is no neatly defined genre, but a thematic category of writing in forms ranging from practical guides on garden design and maintenance to poetry, novels and essays. Illustrated descriptions of gardens and plants, and advice on their planting, care and uses make up the bulk of publications on gardens and gardening. However, gardens and plants have always also featured in texts with literary ambition. Poems in the English language include classics such as Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden' and his less well known 'Mower' poems (1681) and Erasmus Darwin's long poem, *The Botanic Garden* (1791), which was a pioneering work of popular science. Narrative prose in which gardens are more than mere settings for the plot to play out in range from children's books such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic, *The Secret Garden* (1911) and Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) to the Modernist novels of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, the science fiction narratives of Ursula LeGuin, Kim Stanley Robinson and Margaret Atwood, and contemporary works of social realism including Richard Powers's *Gain* (1998) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001).⁹

In the late nineteenth century, a new genre emerged which was midway between purely instructional writing on gardening and these works of literature, consisting of autobiographical accounts of garden-making, garden travelogues and histories of gardens and plantsmen. In the best examples of this body of essayistic nonfiction, for which Jennifer Atkinson, author of a thoughtful and wide-ranging study of American garden literature since the nineteenth century, reserves the term 'garden writing' (3-4),¹⁰ horticultural expertise, rich descriptions of plants and excursions into their cultural history are combined with breadth of general knowledge, innovative thinking and stylistic eloquence.¹¹ American and British garden writers from Charles Dudley Warner and Gertrude Jekyll to Michael Pollan and Ambra Edwards are enthusiasts, who convey information in informal and engaging literary prose, celebrate with playful irony their mistakes and failures in the face of an indifferent nature, and take issue with fashionable gardening practices. They also philosophise: today, accounts of gardening practice often serve as vehicles for reflection on the place of humans in the world and our ethical responsibilities toward nonhumans, and descriptions of garden design can be a medium for working out new forms of human habitation. It might seem quaint to imagine that everyday gardening practices or literature hold any useful responses or solutions in a time of climate change, ocean acidification, soil loss, water depletion, superstorms and drought, chemical pollution and biodiversity loss, Atkinson reflects in her Epilogue. And

⁹ See Atkinson, Chapter 4 on gardening in science fiction, and pp. 7-8 and 209-210 on Powers's novel; Emmett, pp. 147-152 on *The Corrections*.

¹⁰ Her choice of the term is presumably motivated by the analogy with 'nature writing.' In both cases, a degree of literary ambition is present, and both combine observation of nature with attention to the subject and their relationship with nature.

¹¹ See also Rogers's Introduction in *Writing the Garden*.

yet, “perhaps this genre’s reflections have more relevance today than ever, providing insights that uniquely speak to our present moment in the Anthropocene” (201). The second part of this article seeks to support this claim by examining two texts which depict garden-making as a model for interaction with nature in general and reflect on human/nature relations.

Contemporary art and fiction have been the principal focus of research into culture in and for the Anthropocene,¹² but there has been a recent outpouring of scholarship on the emergence of Anthropocenic awareness in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing.¹³ This Early Anthropocene literature registered local environmental destruction, envisaged its globalised consequences, and imagined alternative human/nature relations. Anthropocene debates have prompted new approaches to nineteenth-century canonical works by Mary Shelley, Blake, Byron, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Dickens and Tennyson, the paintings of Constable and Turner, Modernist writing by T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf and the science fiction of H.G. Wells and J.G. Ballard. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, literature and art have served as media for the expression of anxieties about the future consequences of pollution, resource depletion and the extinction of species, and for soul-searching about the place of humans in the world. In this body of work, gardening and garden-making already appeared as a counter model to the exploitative and unsustainable treatment of natural resources which was coming to characterise modernity.

The American Professor of Philosophy Zev Trachtenberg, a specialist in conceptualising and evaluating human transformations of the physical environment, proposed in 2018 in a posting to his blog ‘Inhabiting the Anthropocene’ that past theorists may have developed “concepts whose application to our situation we are [only] now able to perceive” (no pagination). Historical figures in the western tradition of political philosophy such as Rousseau can, he argues, shed light on radically contemporary phenomena like the Anthropocene, because they have already experienced the complexity and the ambivalences in our interaction with nature, and written works that can help us articulate them. Rousseau’s description of the Elysium garden in *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761) is in Trachtenberg’s view “a crucial text” in this respect. However, he does not expand on this further. In the following, I examine *Julie* as an example of Early Anthropocene garden literature. I argue that while the function of the eponymous Julie’s garden within the plot is to compensate for its creator’s unhappy love life, it simultaneously models a way of interacting with nature that differs from that being practised increasingly at the time, one which anticipates tenets of Anthropocene thinking

¹² See for instance Timothy Clark. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Project*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015; Adam Trexler. *Anthropocene Fictions. The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. University of Virginia Press, 2015; David Farrier. *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019; Pieter Vermeulen. *Literature and the Anthropocene*. Routledge, 2020.

¹³ See David Higgins. *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene: Writing Tambora*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Seth T. Reno. *Early Anthropocene Literature in Britain, 1750-1884*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; Kate Rigby. *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

which are formulated more explicitly in Michael Pollan's bestselling philosophical garden memoir, *Second Nature* (1991).

Rousseau's *Julie or the New Heloise*

Rousseau was one of the most important thinkers about the relationship between man and nature in the eighteenth century, and how this relationship had deteriorated and might be improved. He would seem at first glance an unlikely authority for thinking about the Anthropocene: he wrote that everything was good as nature made it, and only corrupted by man and society, arguing in his first Discourse, the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1751), that the legitimisation of luxury and leisure by the arts and sciences had resulted in the moral degradation of mankind. He would also seem an unlikely advocate of gardens or gardening: one would expect pleasure gardens (as works of art and objects of luxury) to be subject to his condemnation. In his second, more celebrated Discourse, the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), he took fundamental issue with human civilisation: accompanied as it has been by the rise of private property, social inequality and the exploitation of humans and the natural world by those who possess wealth and power, it meant departure from the natural world and the state of nature. Humans, who were once carefree and independent hunters, became slaves to domesticity by adopting agriculture. Viewed from this perspective, cultivation is inferior to wildness. We might therefore also expect Rousseau to reject gardening, as an activity which binds individuals to social convention and repetition, and deprives them of their freedom.

There is, however, evidence that Rousseau was interested in both gardens and gardening, and this aspect of his thinking has attracted recent attention from philosophers, cultural historians and literary critics. As Jérôme Brillaud has pointed out, he depicted a series of gardens in his novel-cum-philosophical treatise, *Emile, or On Education*, as well as in the epistolary novel, *Julie*. In *Emile*, gardens are used as settings for lessons on private property, luxury, space, education and theatre.¹⁴ Rousseau presents gardening as a benign form of temporary land appropriation contrasting with territorial conquest (*Emile* 232), and at the end of the book he praises simplicity and avoidance of ostentation in garden design, and advocates integrating vegetable beds and fruit trees in the ornamental garden (525, 604). However, it is in *Julie's* garden that Rousseau's conception of a union of nature and culture through non-exploitative human interaction with the forces of nature finds its clearest and most extensive expression.

The garden is described by St. Preux in a letter to his English friend and mentor, Milord Edward Bomston (Part 4, Letter 11—*Julie* 386–401). Over a period of eight years, Julie has transformed a once dry and unproductive orchard into a lush verdant space which affords shade in the heat of summer. Rivulets are criss-crossed by winding paths. Grassy glades are interspersed with banks of wild flowers, fragrant herbs and garden flowers. Fruit bushes grow between clumps of lilac, hazel, elder, mock orange and broom.

¹⁴ Brillaud, "Beans and Melons: Rousseau's Vegetable Garden," pp. 4–6 and 7–14.

Vines, clematis, honeysuckle, hops and bryony create a canopy between the trees like in a tropical jungle, and ground cover gives the place the appearance of being untouched.

Julie began creating her garden when she was mourning her mother's death: she sought solitude here, and found comfort. More importantly, it has also, we later discover, distracted from and compensated for the lingering pain she suffers because she was forced by her parents to renounce her teenage love for St. Preux. The title of Rousseau's novel invites interpretation of it as a retelling of the tragic love story of the twelfth-century thinker Abelard and his gifted pupil, Heloïse. Heloïse had a child, and the couple married secretly. However, her guardian had Abelard castrated in an act of vengeance. They separated at Abelard's insistence, and both joined religious orders. After many years, Abelard wrote an account of their sufferings, and an exchange of letters followed, in which Heloïse in particular poured out her frustrated longing and passion. Their story attracted countless readers and inspired many adaptations after the Latin manuscript was printed in the early seventeenth century, translated into French in 1687, and popularized in the English-speaking world by Alexander Pope's verse epistle, *Eloisa to Abelard*, in 1717.) Heloise served as a model for feminine passion in particular, and its attempted sublimation or transcendence.

Renunciation of a youthful passion which was pure, but socially unacceptable because of the difference in standing between the tutor and his socially superior pupil, or rather the attempt to transform their relationship into one of platonic serenity, after years of separation, is the central theme of Rousseau's novel. After their enforced separation, Julie and St. Preux devote their lives to higher things. Julie's father has promised her to a fellow nobleman named Wolmar, and as a dutiful daughter, she marries Wolmar. St. Preux goes off on a voyage around the world, and Julie succeeds in forgetting her feelings for him. She finds happiness as wife and mother, and in managing the household. When St. Preux returns from his travels six years later, he is engaged as tutor to the Wolmar children. All live together in harmony, and there are only faint echoes of the old affair between St. Preux and Julie. Julie practices gardening as a form of therapy: her garden becomes a place of moral improvement, where illicit passion is replaced by virtue. For her erstwhile lover too, it possesses a therapeutic function: to St. Preux, it seems a refuge where the sweet sight of nature alone would banish from his memory all the "social and factitious order" that made him so unhappy (399).

St. Preux contrasts Julie's garden with the oppressive and sterile symmetry of the formal gardens in Versailles, but equally with the elaborate, high-maintenance artifice of the great Chinese gardens, and the carefully constructed vistas and grand follies of English landscape gardens such as Stowe. Rousseau's description of the garden is credited with having played an important role in promoting the fashion for picturesque, or sentimental landscape gardens in eighteenth-century France. However, whereas these gardens (like the English ones they were modelled on) typically included temples and monuments bearing inscriptions for meditation, such openly artificial features are conspicuously absent from it. It is instead focused almost entirely on the illusion of naturalness. Embracing wildness and disorder, the garden has been fashioned to imitate the irregularity, simplicity and self-sufficiency of the forests in the surrounding mountains.

The garden blends into the countryside: the walls which enclose two of its sides are masked by bushes which make them look like the outer edge of a wood. The other two sides are formed by hedges of maple, hawthorn, holly and privet. Julie and her husband have arranged a setting in which natural processes may play out on their own, rather than being forced into patterns dictated by fashion or the desire to impress others. (Ornamental gardens commonly served to represent the social status of their owners.) The ground has not been levelled, and nothing is planted in straight lines. Working largely with common grasses and shrubs, the garden requires a minimum of maintenance. All traces of the cultivation and upkeep needed are erased: grass is sown where the ground has been dug up.

Struck by the dense foliage, the abundance of flowers, and the absence of signs of human order, St. Preux initially believes he is transported to a South Sea natural paradise. But Julie corrects him, saying: “It is true [...] that nature did it all, but under my direction, and there is nothing here that I have not designed.” (388) She explains how she has accomplished the effect of complete naturalness by diverting the water from the runoff of an ornamental fountain in the garden above, and using only native plants, “arranged and combined in a manner that yielded a cheerier and pleasanter effect” (ibid.). She has, however, planted and cultivated roses, raspberries, currants, lilac bushes, wild grapes, jasmine, and hazel trees. The garden which Rousseau describes in *Julie* is a utopian model of harmonious fusion of nature and culture, a co-creation of humans with nature, in which plants are given freedom to grow naturally and our non-human fellow creatures are welcome.

The garden is thronged with birds, which are attracted by daily feeding, a pond surrounded by reeds where they can drink and bathe undisturbed, and the shade and security from predators which the garden affords. Julie has had two clearings sown with “a random mixture of grasses, straw, and all sorts of plants,” creating a wildflower meadow with wheat, millet, sunflowers, hemp and vetch—“generally all the seeds birds like” (391). In spring, little piles of horsehair, straw, wool, moss, and other materials suitable for nestbuilding are provided. The enemies of birds (mice, owls and “especially children,” we are told in a note!) are kept away, and “the perpetual peace they enjoy induces them to nest in a convenient place” (392). Access is strictly limited to Monsieur and Madame de Wolmar, her father, the children’s governess, and very occasionally, the children—under strict supervision.) When St. Preux comments approvingly that the birds are guests rather than prisoners in an aviary, Julie counters that it is humans who are the guests here: the birds are the masters. She pays them tribute so they will put up with her occasional presence (391). Humans are then not merely not treated as superior beings: they are not even regarded as the equals of other species.

Julie’s garden is then an exercise in Early Anthropocene imagination of alternative human/nature relations, possessing positive features which anticipate the sort of interaction with nature demanded of us today: it is low-maintenance, but renders nature fertile by means of skilful irrigation, manuring and planting; it respects regional differences by being composed largely of native plants; and it provides a habitat for wildlife. At the same time, it does not altogether neglect food production. The fruits which

are harvested here may appear “unhandsome,” for they do not grow in an orchard planted and maintained in such a way as to maximise the yield, but they are nevertheless “excellent” and bring “pleasure,” for they are the product of thoughtfully cultivated land (389).¹⁵

In a conference paper posted online in 2019, Mark Cladis argues that the Wolmars’ estate of Clarens and Julie’s garden in it offer “a rich, detailed way of life” that provides imaginative resources for combating climate change (1). Rousseau’s description of Clarens begins in Part 4, Letter 10, and takes up much of Part 5. Clarens is modest in size compared with Julie’s ancestral home, the grand and magnificent Chateau d’Etange. It is in effect a large farm, with dairy, vineyards, orchards and a vegetable garden. Clarens is a model of rural simplicity, frugality and good husbandry. Peace and innocence reign in the well-regulated household. As St. Preux notes, Wolmar and his wife have transformed the grounds to accommodate what might be described as an Anthropocene aesthetic finding beauty in what is useful: “The vegetable garden was too small for the kitchen; the flower bed has been turned into a second one, but so elegant and so well designed that this bed thus designed is more pleasing to the eye than before.” “Everywhere they have replaced attractive things with useful things, and attractiveness has almost always come out the better.” (364) “Clarens is one of the first eco-visions that exemplifies a sustainable, interdependent relation between humans and their non-human environment”, Cladis concludes (10). What he calls “Julie’s Alpine eco-community” serves “as a striking alternative to the rapacious economic, social, and political orders of the day,” palpably illustrating Rousseau’s hope that “we can live peaceably and justly with fellow humans and the natural world that sustains us” (13). Rousseau was, Cladis argues, one of the first modern Europeans to begin the work of dismantling the nature/ culture binary in this way (2).

It is, however, important to recognize the doubts about the efficacy of Julie’s garden that Rousseau builds into his narrative. We have seen how Julie’s wealth and social standing forbade her marriage to St. Preux, and how she sought to transcend her passion by creating her garden. Her success is, however, hard-won and precarious. The very name she gives the garden, ‘Elysium,’ betrays a certain ambivalence: this is a paradise, but one which may only be reached after a kind of death. She has created it not least because she does not dare revisit the bower on the other side of the house where she and St. Preux exchanged their first kiss. Julie’s deathbed confession of the anguish caused by her determination not to commit adultery, and of her constant fear of letting down her guard and entering into an illicit affair with St. Preux, exposes the hollowness of her husband’s hope that she and St. Preux can be no more than friends. Julie dies from a fever brought on by nearly drowning in the effort to rescue her son, when he falls into the lake. But there is a hint that she views her death as a release from intolerable tension. It is akin to a desperate act of suicide. Rousseau therefore combines overt didactic aims with a more ambiguous advocacy of freedom to love. The crux of the plot is less the transmutation of

¹⁵ For a reading of the Austrian novelist, Adalbert Stifter’s *Indian Summer* (1857-9) as a comparably oriented work of Early Anthropocene garden literature, see my article “Gardening as an Ecological and Educational Project: Stifter’s Anticipation of Anthropocene Thinking and Aesthetics in *Der Nachsommer*.”

love into friendship, of passion into respect and admiration than the question whether this can be achieved. This ending can be read as casting doubt on the ability of gardening to compensate for suffering from social ills.

We have seen how garden-making is depicted as a form of self-refinement in Rousseau's novel. Working in the garden also plays a part in Julie's plan for the education of her children: helping with gardening tasks is a meaningful occupation which furthers their health (478) and fortifies their character (398). The notion that gardening has a role to play in moral education links *Julie* with one of the best-known works of modern garden writing, Michael Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*.

Pollan's *Second Nature*

Written over thirty years ago, *Second Nature* predates the Anthropocene concept. However, Pollan's depiction of cultivation as inseparable from self-cultivation is particularly apposite in our time. A collection of essays framed by autobiographical narrative and arranged by the seasons, the book combines horticultural information with reflection on ethical and ontological questions about humans and nature, and their social and political implications. The author, professor of journalism and gardener, Pollan uses the story of how he created a five-acre garden out of an abandoned farmstead in New England to draw out the ethical principles inherent in the horticultural lessons he learnt from gardening. He argues that gardening can and should be an exercise in human co-existence with nature, rooted in an ethic of partnership and care, leading to individual wellbeing while increasing the diversity and abundance of life. This kind of gardening is a paradigm for *acting* in nature, as opposed to simply *being* there (3). Americans have a deeply ingrained habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed, he writes (4). This choice is a false one: we need, now more than ever, to learn how to use nature without damaging it. For Pollan, the idea that the garden is a place where nature and culture can be wedded in a way that can benefit both is more important for us today than the cult of wilderness (5). Pollan acknowledges the farmer and poet Wendell Berry, the garden writer Eleanor Perényi, the philosopher of contingency, Richard Rorty, and the critical historian of the notion of wilderness, William Cronon as key influences on his thinking, describing them as "pioneers on the frontier of nature and culture" (6).

He starts by explaining that the most troubling difficulty he encountered in creating his garden was the unexamined attitudes towards nature which he had brought with him. He began gardening from the position of Thoreau and Emerson, who celebrated wilderness and saw weeds as defects of human perception. But he soon realised that as a gardener he must learn how to reconcile letting nature be with meeting his own human needs: he must organise his vegetable beds in such a way that it was possible to keep them free of weeds, build fences to keep out the marauding woodchucks and deer, and make active use of all environmentally acceptable means of pest control.

An ethic based on the garden would accept that the local environment is not always hospitable, and must often be substantially altered in order to admit human habitation and food production. It would be frankly anthropocentric, because nature is indifferent to

our wellbeing, but it would recognise that humans are dependent on many other forms of life, and we must take their interests into account. A losing battle brings him to gradually replace delicate flowers such as delphiniums, campanula and lady's mantle by tougher species including day lilies, evening primrose, rudbeckia and even the common weed, purple loosestrife. And he learns to keep the losses to his vegetables incurred by slugs, larvae, beetles and aphids to an acceptable level with companion planting and ladybirds. Without either resorting to chemicals or trusting blindly in nature to be benign, he writes: I think I've drawn a workable border between me and the forest. It depends on me acting like a sane and civilised human, which is to say, a creature whose nature it is to remake his surroundings, and whose culture can guide him on questions of aesthetics and ethics. What I am making here is a middle ground between nature and culture, a place that is at once of nature and unapologetically set against it: what I'm making is a garden. (53)

In his central chapter, which is ironically entitled "Weeds are us," Pollan develops the argument that we have made so many changes in the land that some form of gardening has become unavoidable (113). Weeding, "the process by which we make informed choices in nature, discriminate between good and bad, apply our intelligence and sweat to the earth" (115), is the very essence of gardening: "My yard is not so different from the rest of the world. We cannot live in it without changing nature irrevocably; having done so, we're obliged to tend to the consequences of the changes we've wrought, which is to say, to weed." Culture as ethical choice and forbearance "offer[s] the planet its last best hope" (ibid.).

Pollan's conception of gardening as the creation of 'second nature,' which he encourages us to extend our interaction with nature *in toto*, thus envisages give and take in a mutual accommodation between humans and the natural world. However, there is no such thing as a harmonious compromise between the two, nor a stable solution: gardens require continual human intervention, and without this they will collapse (49). Gardening will always be hard work, and we are not free to do what we will with the natural environment. Indeed, it is precisely the partialness of our mastery over nature that gives gardening its savour, he argues (131). Knowing how tenuous our human control of nature is, it is time, Pollan writes, in terms comparable to Clément's,

to acknowledge, perhaps even evoke, that tenuousness in the design of our gardens. By leaving some parts wild, and by making a virtue of their juxtapositions with more formal areas, we can introduce into our gardens a measure of doubt about our control of nature, and that might be a good thing to do. (255)

In *Julie*, the twists, turns and dramatic revelations of a complicated plot involve descriptions of sexual encounter, pregnancy, miscarriage, the violence and remorse of a wrathful father and male infidelity. Rousseau's eventful narrative and exploration of highly charged emotions could not be more different from Pollan's reflective autobiographical essays, with their ironic tone and lightness of touch. However, *Julie* and *Second Nature* share a common message, one of hope tinged with realistic doubt. In the novel, we have seen that the attempted transmuting of love into serene, platonic friendship in later life is fragile and ambiguous. The author's overt didactic aims conceal traces of advocacy of freedom to love, and this was presumably not the least of the book's

attractions for his readers. Rousseau's imagined garden offers guidance and hope, but does not conceal the cost, and leaves open whether the aim can ultimately be achieved. The same could be said for Pollan's book, which seeks, without withholding the difficulties involved in gardening, to foster attentive observation, respect and responsibility for nature, and to inspire and guide readers by example. "Gardening [...] is a painstaking exploration of place," he writes: "everything that happens in my garden—the thriving and dying of particular plants, the maraudings of various insects and other pests—teaches me to know this patch of land more intimately, its ecology and microclimate, the particular ecology of its local weeds and animals and insects." (62f.) Gardening "tutors us in nature's ways" and instructs us in how to lessen our dependence of distant sources of energy, technology, food and interest (64).

Rousseau and Pollan leave important questions relating to the Anthropocene unanswered. Where should the line be drawn between painful renunciation of inessential consumption in order to minimise our carbon emissions, and pursuing a strategy of risky high-tech intervention on a scale capable of altering conditions on the planet? What obstacles are there in the way of extending the gardening model outlined here, which relates to private gardens for which a single individual is responsible, to the planet as a whole, and how might they be overcome? As Robert Emmett writes in his history of American garden literature, *Cultivating Environmental Justice*, "significant practical challenges, and perhaps unintended conceptual problems are involved in materialising the planetary garden paradigm" (190). Noting that Rousseau's vision of gardening for the Anthropocene is situated in a context of a rigidly structured class society and depends on benevolent paternalism, the garden historian Susan Taylor-Leduc has argued that *Julie* had the effect of legitimising seigneurial rank and class divisions by giving them a new grounding ("Luxury in the Garden: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* reconsidered"). And while Emmett acknowledges in his account of *Second Nature* the merits of Pollan's "timely and compelling" garden-centred ethic as "a way to address the epistemological problem of human perspective in ecological knowledge and the ethical problems of responsibility to biophysical and social others" (91), he is sharply critical of Pollan's advocacy of the idea of the garden as a model for decision-making about how to shape landscapes, asserting that Pollan's book is characterised by a "white male proprietary perspective" (87) and assumes a degree of affluence and privilege (187). Emmett therefore seeks additional impulses for gardening in the Anthropocene in chapters devoted to black women garden writers, and narratives of urban community gardening and guerrilla gardening.

Clearly, most people in the world lack the leisure and means to garden like Julie, or like Pollan, and a theory of the Earth as a planetary garden would have to recognise this. Rousseau and Pollan have participated in the renegotiation of the public understanding of the human/nature relationship through their imagining of ways of humanising nature and bridging the nature/culture divide. Just as the ultimately tragic enforced relinquishment of love in Rousseau's novel challenged the subordination of private feelings to social and pecuniary family interests in his time, he challenged the use of gardens as displays of wealth and power, and the acquisitiveness associated with economic rationalism. His goal was to cultivate a taste for the alternative kind of culture

that is exemplified in Julie's estate and particularly in her private garden. The gardener's attentiveness to nature can help us attune our desires and align our needs more closely with nature's ways, Pollan writes (195). Rousseau and Pollan have the power to inspire readers to look at how we might interact differently with nature on a planetary scale in the future.

Submission received 7 August 2022

Revised version accepted 21 February 2023

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Jennifer Wren. *Gardenland: Nature, Fantasy, and Everyday Practice*. University of Georgia Press, 2018.
- Bonneuil, Christophe, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz. *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. Translated by David Fernbach, Verso, 2016.
- Boukema, Esther and Philippe V. McIntyre, editors. *Louis G. Le Roy: Nature—Culture—Fusion*. NAI Publishers, 2002.
- Brillaud, Jérôme. "Beans and Melons: Rousseau's Vegetable Garden." *Neophilologus*, vol. 105, 2021, pp. 1-17. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-020-09658-2>
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, Winter 2009, pp. 197-222.
- Cladis, Mark. "Rousseau's Ecological Vision as a Resource for Combating Climate Change." Conference paper, WPSA, San Diego, 2019. <http://www.wpsanet.org/papers/docs/CladisRousseauEcoVision.pdf>
- Clément, Gilles. *The Planetary Garden" and Other Writings*. Translated by Sandra Morris, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.
- Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The 'Anthropocene'." *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter*, no. 41, May 2000, pp. 17-18.
- Emmett, Robert. *Cultivating Environmental Justice: A Literary History of U.S. Garden Writing*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2016.
- Goodbody, Axel. "Gardening as an Ecological and Educational Project: Stifter's Anticipation of Anthropocene Thinking and Aesthetics in *Der Nachsommer*." *Austrian Studies*, vol. 30, 2022, pp. 15-30.
- Marris, Emma. *Rambunctious Garden. Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*. Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Neumeyer, Eva Maria. "The Landscape Garden as a Symbol in Rousseau, Goethe and Flaubert." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1947, pp. 187- 217.
- Plumwood, Val. "Decolonising Australian Gardens: Gardening and the ethics of place." *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 36, 2005. <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2005/07/01/decolonising-australian-gardens-gardening-and-the-ethics-of-place/>
- Pollan, Michael. *Second Nature. A Gardener's Education*. Grove Press, 1991.
- Reynolds, Jesse L. "Earth system interventions as technologies of the Anthropocene." *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, no. 40, 2021, pp. 132-146.

- Rogers, Elizabeth Barlow. *Writing the Garden: A Literary Conversation Across Two Centuries*. Allison and Busby, 2011.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie, or the New Heloise. Letters of Two Lovers who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*. Translated and annotated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 6. University Press of New England, 1997. [French original *Julie ou La nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761]
- . *Emile, or On Education. (Includes Emile and Sophie; or The Solitaries)*. Translated and annotated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 13. University Press of New England, 2010.
- Schwarz, Astrid. "From *Homo faber* to *Homo hortensis*. Gardening techniques in the Anthropocene." *Gardens and Human Agency in the Anthropocene*, edited by Maria Paula Diogo, Ana Simões, Ana Duarte Rodrigues and Davide Scarso, Routledge, 2019, pp. 112–123.
- Subramanian, Meera. "Anthropocene now: influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch." *Nature*, 21 May 2019. Print.
- Taylor-Leduc, Susan. "Luxury in the Garden: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* reconsidered", *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1999, pp. 74-85.
- Trachtenberg, Zev. "Elysium". *Inhabiting the Anthropocene*, 12, 2018. <https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2018/12/12/elysium/>
- Wolschke-Bulmahn, Joachim, editor. *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century*. Dumbarton Oaks, 1997.

Taboo Ecologies: Material and Lyric Dispossession in Anne Spencer's Garden and Seed Catalogs

Jordan A. Norviel
University of Virginia, U.S.A.
jan7xk@virginia.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4890>



Abstract

Harlem Renaissance poet and gardener Anne Spencer drew inspiration from both her garden and reading. In a poem entitled "Taboo," Spencer described reading "garden and seed catalogs, Browning, Housman, Whitman [...] oh anything..." and, in doing so, asserted the significance of her catalogs alongside literary works as inspiration for her poetry. The poem as a whole describes how Black women evade the Jim Crow South through covert activities like reading which for Spencer, importantly included garden and seed catalogs. Where Spencer's poetry and garden have been the subject of academic research, her catalogs have yet to receive the same scholarly attention. This paper argues that by placing garden and seed catalogs in the same category of taboo reading as canonical poets and conventional forms of journalism, Spencer aligns the botanical with the literary as a form of resistance. The seed catalogs Spencer engaged with reveal a long history of racism in the cultivation and naming of garden plants. This paper examines the history of seed catalogs, showing how the naming of plants is a continuation of the racist logic of possession, reflected in the naming of plants by stripping the plant of its previous context and replacing it with the names of colonial scientists and racial slurs. Spencer's poetic insistence on dispossession, the literal and metaphorical disembodiment and ejection from property, pushes against conceptions of ownership over the natural world in that it subverts the racist logic of possession. I contend that Anne Spencer actively intertwined histories by drawing on catalogs, poetry, and gardening to create new ecologies in the spaces between reading and writing, lyrical and material. The new ecology of Spencer's garden far exceeds a place where plants are grown but rather becomes a space that blooms through the material, the lyrical, and social spaces, leaving behind instead a living archive of rebellion.

Keywords: Anne Spencer, garden and seed catalogs, antiblackness.

Resumen

La poeta y jardinera del renacimiento de Harlem, Anne Spencer, se inspiraba tanto en su jardín como en la lectura. En un poema titulado "Taboo", Spencer describió leer "catálogos de jardinería y semillas, Browning, Housman, Whitman [...] oh, cualquier cosa..." y, al hacerlo, afirmó la importancia de sus catálogos, así como la de las obras literarias como inspiración para su poesía. Su poema como un todo describe cómo las mujeres negras se evadían del sur de Jim Crow a través de actividades encubiertas como la lectura, lo que para Spencer incluía de forma importante los catálogos de jardinería y semillas. Mientras que la poesía y la jardinería de Spencer han sido materia de investigación académica, sus catálogos aún no han recibido la misma atención intelectual. Este artículo sostiene que al situar los catálogos de jardinería y semillas en la misma categoría de lectura tabú que a los poetas canónicos y las formas convencionales de periodismo, Spencer alinea lo botánico con lo literario como forma de resistencia. Los catálogos de semillas con los que interactuaba Spencer revelaban una larga historia de racismo en el cultivo y denominación de las plantas de jardín. A lo largo de este trabajo se examina la historia de los catálogos de semillas, mostrando cómo la denominación de las plantas es una continuación de la lógica racista de la posesión, reflejada en la nomenclatura de las plantas al desvincular a la planta de su contexto previo y reemplazarlo con los nombres de científicos coloniales y calumnias raciales. La insistencia poética de Spencer en la expropiación, en la

desmaterialización literal y metafórica y en la expulsión de la propiedad se opone a las concepciones de pertenencia sobre el mundo natural al subvertir la lógica racista de la posesión. Sostengo que Anne Spencer entrelazaba activamente las historias recurriendo a los catálogos, la poesía y la jardinería para crear nuevas ecologías en los espacios entre la lectura y la escritura, lo lírico y lo material. La nueva ecología del jardín de Spencer va mucho más allá de un lugar donde se cultivan plantas para convertirse en un espacio que florece a través de los espacios materiales, líricos y sociales, dejando atrás un archivo vivo de rebelión.

Palabras clave: Spencer, Anne, catálogos de jardines y semillas, antinegrura

In a letter to a poet friend, Anne Spencer wrote, “Being a Negro woman is the world’s most exciting / game of taboo” (*Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum*). This game consisted of both knowing deeply the limitations imposed by racism and patriarchy and the creative ways Black women evade and subvert these limitations. Spencer further explains, “we do not climb into the jim crow galleries. / we stay away and read,” signifying that reading is not a passive act but one that circumvents barriers in the Jim Crow south. Anne Spencer reads “garden and seed catalogs, Browning, Housman, Whitman, Saturday evening post / detective tales, Atlantic Monthly, American Mercury, Crisis, Opportunity, Vanity Fair, Hibberts Journal, oh anything...” (*Anne Spencer House Museum*). As this list suggests, what would it mean to read garden and seed catalogs as and with her poetry? This paper invites readers to think of ecology existing in the permeability of the social, lyrical, and botanical spaces and in doing so lean into the co-creation of Spencer’s garden and poetry. Spencer tended to the literal garden as a space of refuge for Black social and intellectual life. Additionally, her annotations and poetry in the garden books reject the possessive history reflected in naming plants and evade a taxonomy of poetic form; her poetry resides within garden and seed catalogs as well as the literal garden. Writing within the pages of her seed catalogs, Spencer both nurtures a garden out of language salvaged from racist histories and a literal garden in the Jim Crow South. By eluding neat categorizations of poetry, catalog, and garden, Spencer demonstrates her poetics in excess, effectively turning these categorizations on their head. This poetics of excess builds from what Christina Sharpe describes as Black annotation and redaction, a way of seeing “in excess of what is caught in the frame” as a “counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see” (117). By placing garden and seed catalogs in the same category of taboo reading as canonical poets and conventional forms of journalism, Spencer aligns the botanical with the literary, cultivating new ecologies and asking us to look differently at Black life in the garden.

The evasion of categorization pushes back against ideas of ownership and domination of the natural world through symbolic and literal possession. Franz Fanon explains that “The colonial world is a compartmentalized world” (3) in reference to how Europeans organized cities within the colonies. Fanon goes on to explain that a key strategy in the struggle for liberation is puncturing these categorizations in order to find where colonial power resides. Reading Fanon alongside Spencer, we can understand the separation of poetry from the lived materials, the racialized naming of plants, and the segregation of the South all as an intentional compartmentalization of Black life with the intent of possession. This possession occurs on the literal level, the ownership of land and

the ownership of the enslaved as domination, and on a spiritual level as a haunting or taking over of the body. By writing through catalogs, Spencer refuses the compartmentalization of her poetry from her daily activities so that her poetry becomes bound up with catalogs and the garden itself. Within the content of her poetry, Spencer describes the dispossession of the body into landscapes as a direct counter to owning land. Rather than depicting ownership and control over nature, Spencer's "Requiem," for example, places the speaker's decaying body as a source of nourishment and eternal memory within the garden. And just as Spencer rejected the logic of possession in her garden poems, she sought to create a green space that resisted this paradigm. Spencer's physical garden served as a place of refuge from the physical threats of white supremacy and a nurturing location for Black social and intellectual life. This place of refuge is a continuation of what we might call, following Sharpe, Spencer's new ecologies, where the garden becomes the location of a collective ecology that exists beyond Spencer. Her garden served as connective tissue between Virginia and Harlem, rupturing the stability of a singular, isolated landscape.

This essay begins by situating Spencer's poetry, life, and home in the context of the Jim Crow South. The garden and all of its excess can be read as a site of material and social significance to Black intellectual life, and I suggest we consider Spencer's garden an archive of her poetry and a rebellious new ecology growing against the Jim Crow South. Next, considering the importance of seed catalogs to Spencer's work, I show how the seed catalogs Spencer used reflected the racist logic of possession through the use of racialized language in plant names and the occlusion of botany's essential role in colonial plunder. While Spencer's catalogs are part of this legacy, her annotations within them not only refuse to ignore the racist logics bound up in plant naming but challenge readers to see in excess of what is on the page. Establishing a relationship between Spencer's annotation practices and her poetry, I show how Spencer's oeuvre resided throughout her home and garden. The continuation between the page and the garden exemplifies Spencer's poetics of excess in that Spencer's poetry and garden nourish one another to such an extent as to render both inseparable. The way that Spencer converged the material, social and lyrical suggests that the garden itself exists in what Sharpe describes as new ecologies. Sharpe tells us that the weather of antiblackness is pervasive and "necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (106). In the weather of antiblackness, Anne Spencer grew a garden. She annotated through seed lists, wrote antagonistically to the idea of property, and nurtured an ecology where Black social and intellectual life could thrive in a dangerous and unlikely environment. The new ecology of Spencer's garden far exceeds a place where plants are grown; instead, it blooms through the material, the lyrical, and social spaces fostering intimate connections.

The Garden

While Spencer cites her early childhood outside of school as the starting point for her interest in nature, it was not until after her marriage to Edward Spencer and when they moved to 1313 Pierce Street in Lynchburg, Virginia, that she began gardening

extensively. Edward repaired and expanded their home and garden, which was formerly the location of a confederate recruitment camp, from primarily salvaged and repurposed materials (Frischkorn and Rainey 12). Spencer's garden was a place of refuge, social entertainment, and inspiration for poetry. Frischkorn and Rainey explain that for Spencer, "Experience with her own garden offered the grounding from which her expressions of ideas could take flight" (57). Many of Spencer's poems take place in the garden, which Spencer famously described as "Half my world" (qtd. in Greene 186). More than an appreciation for the natural world, we can see how Spencer's reading and writing about the garden actively challenge structures of white supremacy. Where it is true that Spencer took great pride in owning her own home and cultivating a beautiful garden, it would be misguided to assume that she was striving for the type of middle-class gardening exemplified by the segregated gardening clubs of the time. Rather, Spencer responded to the dominant mode of gardening, steeped in whiteness and class status, by framing her devotion to the earth differently.

In this, Spencer was not alone. Speaking about the connection between poetry and gardening, Alice Walker asks in "In Search of Our Mothers Gardens," "How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write?" (368). Walker describes how Black women's creative genius has been stifled under slavery and its afterlives but how when we look toward unconventional sources, other forms of expression emerge in everyday life. In the evocative essay, Walker points to her mother's garden as the location of creative genius, inviting readers to search for other forms of Black women's intellectual contribution growing in unlikely locations. Scholarship in the last decade has further illuminated the complex histories between African American women, gardening, and the environment that predominantly white environmental history has neglected. Diane D. Glave explains,

Despite the limitations imposed by enslavement, sharecropping, and racism, including limited access to better land, agricultural methods, and plants or crops, these women took some patches and attempted to make them their own through aesthetics and conservation efforts. (116)

Considering African American relationships to nature more generally in the introduction to *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, Camille Dungy tells the story of a segregated swimming pool in Anne Spencer's hometown of Lynchburg. The pool closed after being forced to integrate and is now home to a large box elder tree. Dungy writes, "Thanks to the tree's tenacity, its remarkable, beautiful, uncompromised growth, the mechanisms that accommodate this simple form of recreation have been destroyed" (xix). What is so striking about the box elder story Dungy details is how the tree embodies what Kimberly Ruffin calls the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" (17) within one location and demonstrates nature as an active participant, a theme Spencer herself takes on in her poetry. In describing Lynchburg specifically, Dungy's introduction helps situate Spencer's poetry in conversation with the racial and botanical violence that enveloped her hometown. This is all the more interesting when we consider Spencer as a part of the

Harlem Renaissance while residing in Virginia, a complexity that highlights the significance of both Spencer's poetic prowess and the importance of her garden.

Spencer's garden provided material and social support to Black writers, activists, intellectuals, and students traveling through Lynchburg. Not only did her home serve as a safe place to stay in a city that would not allow Black people to rent hotel rooms, but her garden was often the location of social and intellectual life. Visitors to Spencer's home and garden include James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others. In her garden, Spencer also tutored Ota Benga, a Congolese man displayed in the Bronx Zoo monkey house prior to moving to Virginia. Pamela Newkirk speculates that the garden would have been important to Benga and that he might have found comfort and companionship learning with a fellow nature lover (227). The word "garden" in and of itself is an inadequate designation in that it does not account for the significance of refuge for Spencer and Black life in Virginia in the twentieth century both materially, in the form of a safe meeting space and, socially, through the intellectual and political life the garden nurtured.

In comparison to other Harlem Renaissance poets, Spencer has not received as much scholarly attention. This can be attributed, in part, to her unconventional publication history, gender, location in Virginia, or the assumption that her poetry was not as political as that of her peers (Greene 128). Additionally, Spencer does not fit neatly into poetic, political, or social categories. She drew inspiration from a variety of sources (as we see listed in "Taboo") with some scholars even going as far as to claim that Spencer wrote within the "white male tradition in which she envisioned her own writing" (Karapetkova 229). However, Karapetkova describes

Far from merely mimicking writers like Browning and Yeats, Spencer takes their tradition (and the art long held to be the province solely of white men) and uses it to protest the exclusion and neglect of voices like her own. The fact that we are still able to hear her voice clearly through her poems—the voice of a black woman continually questioning the exclusive whiteness and maleness that dominated modernist writing—marks the triumph of her art. (440)

Going further, Spencer takes gardening, a tradition more commonly associated with white women's leisure, and uses it to produce material spaces that serve as a source of poetic inspiration, a place for community, personal pleasure, political expression, and at times the reminder of generational terror associated in the cultivation of plants. Carlyn Ferrari argues that because Spencer wrote extensively about nature as a Black woman, "Spencer's poetry is highly subversive and arguably even more overtly subversive than her more critically-acclaimed contemporaries. Spencer's poems about nature serve as a counternarrative to the natural world as a 'white space'" (187). Scholarship concerned with Spencer's poetry has demonstrated her significant contributions and challenges to environmental and canonical poetry, but we also might consider how the materiality of her poetry, the literal surfaces she wrote on and about, influences both the form and content of her poems. Spencer's direct engagement with possessive plant names and her creation of a garden that was a site of refuge for herself and others inseparably influenced her poetry's content, meaning that her poetry lived among her flowers and her friends, all in spite of an atmosphere of antiblackness.

Herein, I argue, lies a form of what Spencer calls taboo. She writes that, as a Black woman, “By hell there is nothing you can/ do that you want to do and by heaven you are/ going to do it anyhow” (*Anne Spencer House Museum*). Under the violences of both racism and sexism, Spencer describes Black women as existing in an “exciting game of “Taboo” that requires both gumption and creativity to move through the world. Rather than pursuing more overt and public acts of rebellion in and against the Jim Crow south, Spencer subverts the limitations placed on Southern Black women through the domestic and intellectual space of her garden and reading. This domestic space thrives as

money did not buy- it was born and evolved
slowly out of our passionate, poverty-
stricken agony to own our own home.
Happiness. (*Anne Spencer House Museum*)

Spencer describes a domestic sphere brought about through constant struggle and passion, a place that nurtured so much life, human and otherwise. Roughly the same size as the house itself, Spencer’s garden was also constructed through salvaged materials, plants transplanted from around the region, and seeds ordered through the mail, the names of which connect Spencer to larger histories of botany and empire.

Annotations

The seed catalogs that Spencer used reflect a long history of western colonial powers laying claim to global natures. Naming, far from a passive action, asserts a claim or ownership over an entity. What we see listed alongside illustrations of perfect specimens is an assertion of ownership. Creating poetry and life within the naturalized racism of garden catalogs takes seriously the consequences of a name. Jamaica Kincaid, tracing the history of colonial plunder through the naming of plants, writes, “The naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away— that it is a murder, an erasing...” (122). This possession refers, in part, to the way European botanists named plants after themselves or their peers and in doing so completely stripped plants of their cultural significance, specificity, and history, creating instead a commodity to be extracted. Many scholars have written extensively about the relationship between colonialism and botany. For example, Londa Schiebinger argues, “The botanical sciences served the colonial enterprise and were, in turn, structured by it. Global networks of botanical gardens, the laboratories of colonial botany, followed the contours of empire, and gardens often served its needs” (11). Empire required the possession of plants from the colonies to be made into gardens for imperial use. Further, the “global botany of empire” has relied on slave labor since its inception in the Caribbean and South American sugar plantations (Batsaki, Cahalan, and Tchikine 4). In short, botany and gardening are far from neutral traditions, and their colonial afterlives leave traces in the seemingly cheerful seed catalogs.

Garden and seed catalogs in the United States date back to the late eighteenth century when D. Landreth Seed Company sent out the first catalog exclusively for seeds in 1784. However, likely due to technological gardening advances, the development of the post office, and the expansion of empire, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a remarkable expansion in catalogs. Westward expansion drove many white settlers away

from their usual, local suppliers for both seeds and information, which, in turn, prompted a new demand for seed catalogs. This demand also coincided with both a growing interest in gardening after a boom in the middle class and the shipment of newly “discovered” plants following the 1893 World’s Colombia Exposition in Chicago (Smith 109). Additionally, Judith Farr explains how, while gardening existed across class divides in the nineteenth century, catalogs marketed themselves in accordance with upper-class tastes, suggesting an ideal audience.¹

The agricultural advances of the twentieth century greatly impacted garden and seed catalogs in that the plants ordered were often new cultivated varieties (cultivars) as opposed to heirloom varieties. Liberty Hyde Bailey coined the term cultigen in 1918 and cultivar in 1924 in an attempt to categorize specific changes in plants that have occurred through domestication. He proposed cultivar to explain “a botanical variety, or for a race subordinate to species that has originated and persisted under cultivation...” (Bailey 113-114). What is important about cultivars for our purposes is that the naming of plants far exceeds species and spills into what Bailey describes, tellingly, as race. Further, where Bailey expressed an emphasis on binomial nomenclature or an insistence on a consistent scientific language, the connection between botany and horticulture was beyond scientific control. Put differently, where the idea for naming cultigens followed the scientific classification into “race,” the explosion of horticulture in the early twentieth century eclipsed scientific classification and instead used names more aligned with marketing rather than science. While catalogs had some illustrations of plants, these did not account for every variety sold, so the names of plants had to convey a message about the product. Considering that naming practices were used to market a particular plant and that gardening was primarily a white, middle-class activity, it can be inferred that these names were reflective of white, middle-class tastes and fantasies.

We should consider the connections between naming practices and the marketing of plant varieties in conjunction with the historical whiteness of gardening as a practice. The 1920s saw a paradoxical interest in gardening. On the one hand, plant breeding and hybridization were incredibly specialized and reflective of cutting-edge technological manipulation of plant life, but, on the other hand, the garden and especially its flowers were seen as a return to a simpler, and whiter past likely due to moral panics surrounding urbanization, racism, and xenophobia. Plant patents that formalized the ownership over specific varieties of plants as intellectual property were established in 1930 and expanded in the 1950s, opening up unprecedented debates over who owns, creates, and names nature. We can infer how these debates were reflected in circulating garden and seed catalogs.

It is crucial to consider where Spencer fits in this history. It is fair to assume women like Spencer were not considered as the audience for these catalogs. The Jim Crow laws legally segregating the South were in place for almost all of Spencer’s life, and she lived through and was profoundly impacted by extrajudicial white terrorism present throughout the United States but concentrated especially in the South. Considering the

¹ Farr’s attentive book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* provides excellent contextualization for gardening in the nineteenth century, including the discussion about class and taste in garden catalogs cited above. Where there are obvious similarities between Emily Dickinson and Anne Spencer in that both women shared a passion for gardening and wrote poetry in unconventional forms, I hesitate to discuss Dickinson at length because of the specificity of Spencer’s experience as a Black woman in the South.

pervasiveness of white supremacy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the names within garden and seeds catalogs uphold the same racist logic.

The racism found in the garden and seed catalogs is part of a Lost Cause narrative in which gardeners are encouraged to fantasize about and cultivate memories of the Antebellum South. Given that gardening was a form of moral restoration for white women in response to an increasingly urban and non-white nation at the same time that the Lost Cause narrative yearned for a return to a racial order, we can see how these two strands converge within the pages of these catalogs. By the twentieth century, the proliferation of cultivars meant that plants were named with a marketable signifier of their appearance or other characteristics. The act of naming frequently evoked racialized language toward Black people to describe plant color in particular. For instance, seed catalogs in Spencer's collection included lighter colored flowers named "Quadroon" or "Pretty Quadroon," while darker varieties are "Nigrette" and "Sambo" (*Spencer Collections*). Such references were not isolated to Spencer's catalogs and reflect the larger logic of naming plants. Matthew Roth explains that the phenomenon of naming soybeans after confederate soldiers

was not simply an invasion on paper. It pointed to a dramatic transformation of Southern agriculture, in which new soybean varieties played a major role once held by cotton. It was also a vivid indication of how this transformation largely excluded African American sharecroppers, who were being actively pushed off the land. (np.)

Roth points us to historically situate plant names at a moment of extreme disparity in land access that rendered itself visible through open threats of racial terror as well as by dispossession from land ownership like sharecropping. By naming cultivated varieties of soybeans after confederate soldiers, farmers were acting out the Lost Cause desire to (re)cultivate a racial order dependent on making property out of other humans.

But perhaps more disturbingly, the catalogs Spencer read were not usually from the South and were sold for home gardens rather than commercial crops. What then were readers being invited to cultivate? Rather than viewing these plant names as an isolated act, how might we consider the afterlife of colonial possession through a name within these plant catalogs?

Often, racialized plant names were used to indicate the color of a plant, usually in shades of purple, where the name corresponded to the relative lightness or darkness of a particular plant. By tapping into the racially charged lexicon, nurseries did not have to offer a detailed explanation of a plant's appearance but instead knew customers would infer characteristics of a given plant via the name. It is important to emphasize that this racialized language existed in and contributed to what Sharpe has called the "pervasive climate of antiblackness" (106), meaning the entire atmosphere of social, political, intellectual, and material circumstances in which these plants were cultivated. Sharpe's weather describes how "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" (106). By evoking Sharpe's weather, I want to highlight this pervasiveness even in spaces seemingly "natural" or neutral like plant nurseries.

In response to this climate of antiblackness, Sharpe asks "what must we know in order to move through these environments in which in which the push is always toward Black death?" (106). Part of the violence in the push toward Black death is the suppression and erasure of Black history, which Spencer actively resists through knowing and making known. Whereas nineteenth century catalogs frequently identified points of origin for

plants, celebrating the far reaches of empire, Spencer's catalogs tell a different story. The histories of botanical naming, classifying, and abstracting are absent from the pages of Spencer's catalogs so that the places plants are from and where their names come from are forgotten, in effect flattening the differences between plants and places and creating an inventory out of what was once an ecosystem. Spencer, however, refuses this erasure with her signature, soft annotations. Sharpe describes Black annotation and redaction as examples of "wake work," which is a "mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). Concerning annotations in particular, Sharpe writes, "I want to think about what these images call forth. And I want to think through what they call on us to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery- which is to say, in an ongoing present of subjugation and resistance" (116). Spencer, through Black annotation, calls on us to do, think, and feel in the wake of slavery. In her copy of "Hardy Plants by Wayside Garden " from 1935, Spencer wrote over top of the "Shortia" catalog entry in pencil: "Native N.C. named for Horticulturist Short circa 1700" (Spencer, *Collection*). Where the shortia can be grown somewhat easily in the twentieth century garden, it was extremely elusive to botanists in the nineteenth century. The shortia was named by New England botanist Asa Gray after Kentucky botanist Charles Wilkins Short in 1839 (not the eighteenth century, as Spencer suggests). Gray himself never saw the shortia bloom in person and spent years searching for the plant only to find it in the 1870s without flowers. In fact, Gray named the shortia while he was residing in Paris,² relying on dried specimens collected by field botanists. Similarly, Short never saw the flower in person despite being from the same habitat as the flower. Considering neither Gray nor Short ever saw the flower bloom in person, it is all the more audacious that Gray named the flower after Short, laying claim to a flower neither knew. The history unfolding in this catalog annotation is filled with the unknowns about which we can only speculate.

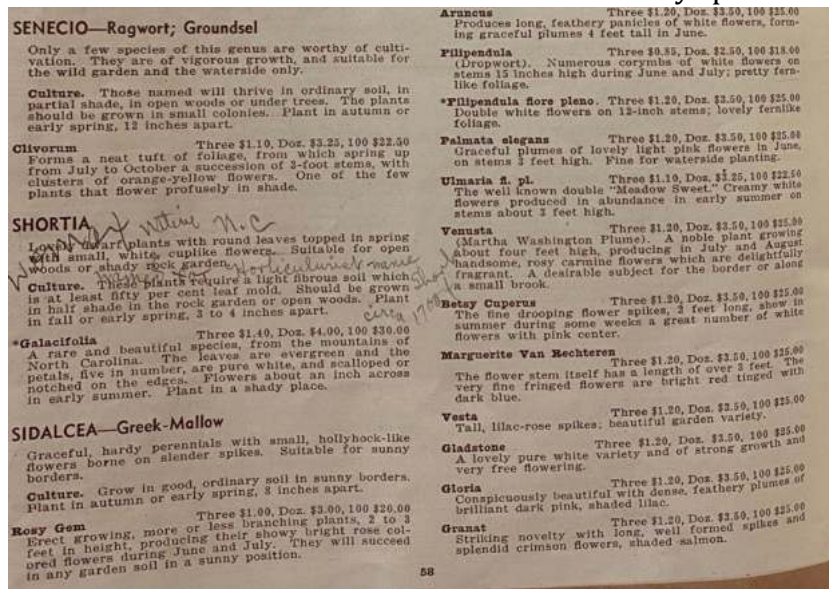


Fig. 2 Courtesy of the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum, Inc. Archives

² The "discovery" of this flower made the Southern landscape where Spencer's family lived as enslaved people a point of intrigue to 19th century scientists. The environment was described uncritically by historian A. Hunter Dupree- "the southern Appalachians, like the southern Rockies, stood out as a region ripe for botanical conquest" (86).

Spencer wrote in catalogs beyond what was necessary to purchase for her garden; instead, her annotation points us toward animating histories otherwise abandoned. Sharpe, referencing Black authors' manipulation of images and texts, tells us that

Redaction and annotation toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visibility...I am imagining that the work of Black annotation and Black redaction is to enact the movement to that inevitable—a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see. (117)

The photograph of botanists in Gray's biography includes a list of names and the note that "The other members of the party are unidentified" (Dupree 256). One of the only unidentified members is the Black man appearing at the edge of the frame carrying a white cloth and pot of what we can imagine might be coffee or tea. Where we are not able to know to what extent Spencer knew about Asa Gray and his botanical parties, Spencer's attunement to botanical history is reading "in excess of what is caught in the frame" in that her writing into the catalogs of listed plants counters the abandonment of plants seemingly existing outside of time and place within the pages of the catalog. She invites us to "try to look, to try to really see" who is in between all of these lists and names, refusing the orderliness of inventory that is so bound to the logic of possession.



Gray in the field. La Veta Pass, Colorado, 1877. Left to right, seated, Sir Joseph Hooker, Professor Asa Gray, Mrs. Strachey, Mrs. Asa Gray, Dr. Lamborn, General Strachey, and Dr. F. V. Hayden. Mr. James Stevenson is standing between Dr. Lamborn and General Strachey. (The other members of the party are unidentified.)

Fig. 3 Gray in the field 1877. *Asa Gray 1810-1888*, by A. Hunter Dupree, 1959, p. 256

Spencer demonstrates thoughtful movement through and engagement with the pages of her garden and seed catalogs. Now housed at the University of Virginia, the poet's catalogs from 1935 to 1975 contain numerous examples of racialized or colonial language (Spencer, *Collection*). The catalogs themselves are from New York, Kansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Holland and contain plants from across the world. Usually, the back cover of a given catalog will have a printed sticker addressed to Mrs. Spencer at 1313 Pierce Street. Within their pages, there are photos and illustrations, both black and white and in color, of exotic flowers in between lengthy lists of plant names. In a 1951 Iris catalog, there is a list of flower names, "Purple Crescent, Purple Giant, Purple Moor,

Quadroon, Quinda, Rabahere, Radiance, Radiant,” appearing with a pencil check mark next to Rabahere (Spencer, *Collection*). This page is typical of many other pages within this collection in that innocuous plant names appear alongside racialized names describing the plants. Also typical are Spencer’s soft check marks and notations of how many seeds the poet might order and what season she might plant them, reminding us that there was a woman leafing through the pages of these catalogs, reading the lists of names that are at times unwelcoming or hostile to Black and non-white people and imagining how they might color her garden.

A remarkable example of this seemingly mundane violence occurs in Spencer’s 1935 Wayside Garden catalog with a red phlox named “Africa.” The phlox is described as “Brilliant carmine-red with blood-red eye. Well shaped flower heads composed of large florets. Good strong stem and not subject to mildew” (Spencer, *Collection*). This description makes readers examine a flower like a body, taking stock of their blood-red eyes and well-shaped heads. By comparison, the other varieties of phlox on the page include ten named after specific people. The only other red phlox, “Leo Schlageter,” is named after a World War I German martyr whose flower is described in the following manner: “Seldom one has seen a shade of red such as is produced by this fine new Phlox. Its brilliant scarlet blooms seem to glow with fire... The best red Phlox in existence today” (Spencer, *Collection*). Recalling Roth’s soybeans, we can see a pattern emerging with the connection to soldiers and plants, suggesting yet another invitation to participate in violence via flowers. The shocking difference between describing an “African” flower through blood and its ability to withstand disease alongside a specific soldier’s brilliance is an example of how the garden is already bound with violence. Further, the creators of these cultivars, which Bailey described as race, use the name to equate plants with Black people and make them objects for sale, while also valorizing specific soldiers and making them memorials. The centuries-long entanglement of race, colonialism, and botany continues in these examples. As Spencer notes, she read these catalogs in the company of poetry and journalism, and, by reading the lists of names like literature, we become attentive to the violence held in plant names.

Pointedly, on the same page as the phlox, Spencer marks the cultivar “Daily Sketch,” writing “one” in the margin (Spencer, *Collections*). We can imagine Spencer picturing where this flower might grow in her garden and how it might complement her other plants, but we can also imagine Spencer playing with the flower’s language. A straightforward reading of this notation would suggest that Spencer planned to order one packet of phlox seeds. However, given that there are no photos of the flower and that Spencer would be selecting this variety explicitly through the description provided, it is worth examining this description in closer detail. This particular phlox is described as “A splendid and worthwhile English novelty” (Spencer, *Collection*). The name “Daily Sketch” suggests that reading descriptions of “African” blood and hardiness alongside descriptions of soldiers and their beauty reflects a mundane still life sketch. Further, the description “English novelty” works to invert the colonial gaze by making an English flower Spencer’s specimen. This is a particularly fascinating choice given the English dominance of colonial botany and the implementation of a relationship to plants that

Kincaid describes as motivated by “their need to isolate, name, objectify, possess various parts, people, and things in the world” (143). One might also consider how Spencer herself wrote about English gardens in her poem “Life Long, Poor Browning,” where the speaker laments that Robert Browning never saw Virginia, but instead “Primroses, prim indeed, in quiet ordered hedges” (qtd. in Greene 185). There is a quiet subversion here in taking an English novelty and growing it not in an orderly prim garden but in the new ecology of a Virginia garden full of Black social and political life.

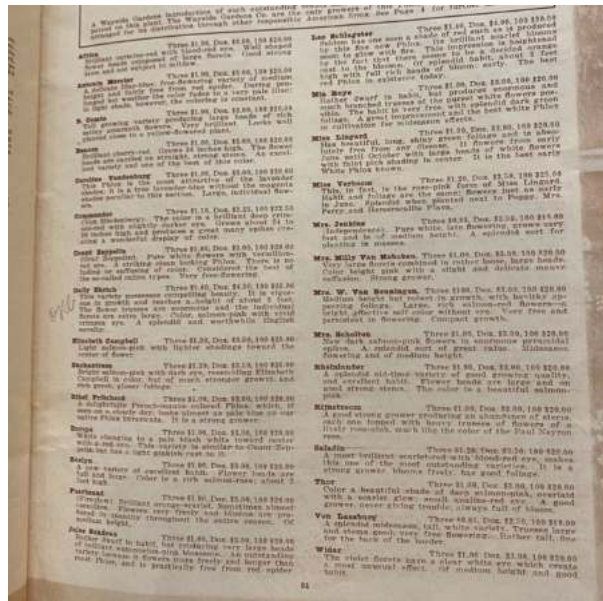


Fig. 1 Courtesy of the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum, Inc. Archives

New Ecologies

Moving away from the logic of possession that is static and totalizing, Spencer turns toward lively surfaces to counter the stability of categorizations. In addition to narrating and circling in seed and garden catalogs, Spencer also explicitly used the catalogs to write more recognizable poetry. Perhaps most beautifully, we see this in Spencer's copy of *Dreer's Garden Book of 1931*, where the poet composed a poem alongside cornflowers (qtd. in Frischkorn and Rainey np). Spencer situated her poetry in everyday life through writing on lively surfaces: books, catalogs, walls, and scraps of paper. She wrote on materials that were part of her abundant life, materials that now reside in the University of Virginia's Special Collections, a university that did not admit Black students until the 1950s when Spencer would have been in her 60s. Saidiya Hartman describes looking for her enslaved relatives in the archives, writing, “The archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the person cataloged, embalmed and sealed away in box files and folios” (17). While Spencer wrote prolifically about her life and her materials have been preserved, we might think with Hartman about how archives embalm, exclude, and abstract a once-living person. Entering the archive (what Hartman calls a mortuary), one must take seriously the materials as a vital form and artistic expression. Spencer's poem written in the

cornflowers was from a 1931 Dreer gardening guide on a colorful illustration. Tellingly, only a few pages out of the nearly 100-page catalogs are in color, suggesting that Spencer did not write the poem here because it was the only piece of paper that she could find but rather as an intentional artistic choice.

Spencer's poem in the Dreer guide portrays the garden not as a space where the speaker becomes a proper, singular human, but rather as the location of her dispossession. The poem reads as follows

not many things I know nor do,
but one!
This my poor heart
so vacant and so frail
can love you
can love you
and dispossess
itself of content
and of strength (qtd. in Frischkorn and Rainey np).

Written on top of a white cornflower, Spencer explains that her heart *dispossesses* itself of content. By loving another so entirely, Spencer's heart no longer remains its own. If to name something is to possess, what might it mean then if to love someone so fully the heart dispossesses itself? More significantly still, Spencer writing a love poem in a garden catalog intended for instruction and possession destabilizes the authority of gardens and their separation from lived experiences. The purpose of the garden book is, in theory, to sell goods and teach one how to cultivate a garden efficiently, but instead, Spencer disrupts notions of order and propriety to express a love that dispossesses. In this sense, we can see Spencer ejecting her heart from possession through loving another person and surrendering her heart from her own possession. Importantly, Spencer does not describe her heart's dispossession as the possession by another. Rather, her heart appears to be without possession entirely. Moreover, Spencer uses the image of colorful cornflowers and exposes the "fundamental relation between pictorial or figurative representations and the written sign systems that represent language" (Shockley 500) by dispossessing her heart along with a literal list of possessions for sale. In doing so Spencer highlights the beauty and vulnerability but also the pain of loving someone without ownership which is further inflected through the juxtaposition with the cornflowers.

Spencer makes a similar move in her poem "Requiem." This poem is not written in the garden and seed catalogs, yet these materials make us read the poem in a new light. A new ecology would have us consider the relationships between the catalogs, the garden, and the poem and reject the categorizations that would hold Spencer's thought as separate. Rather than just a metaphorical or ideal garden for the speaker, we consider the garden as Spencer's own, a real place steeped in history. In the poem, where the speaker describes the irony of "I who so wanted to own some earth, / am consumed by the earth instead" (qtd. in Greene 197). The first line in Spencer's poem can be understood as a desire for possession through ownership. The speaker expresses the futility of this desire as she becomes "Blood into river / Bone into land.... Breath into air / Heart into grass" not only dispossessing (ejecting from ownership) herself from the land but becoming possessed by the land instead. Ferrari describes Spencer's poetry as pushing against the notion of possession, writing "Just as the various elements of her garden were not to be consumed, black womanhood is not to be co-opted or corrupted" (186). Interestingly in

this poem, Spencer's consumption by the earth works to transcend the kind of consumption Ferrari is concerned with. Rather than being used and consumed under patriarchy and white supremacy, Spencer is consumed by the earth as a source of nourishment. The act of being fully consumed by the earth gives way to "My heart bereft / I might rest then." Describing the act of being fully consumed or possessed by the earth gives way to a rest Spencer cannot know as a human.

The poem then becomes, like the cornflower poem, an act of dispossession through the poet's own disembodiment. Both the cornflower poem and "Requiem" share the words "possess" and "bereft," creating a sonic resonance. Additionally, the two poems emphasize the heart in direct connection to dispossession, emphasizing the role of the body as material. In the cornflower poem, the heart dispossesses itself through love. In "Requiem" Spencer writes the word heart twice, one "Heart into grass" and the other "My heart bereft- I might rest then" (qtd. in Greene 197). Reading the two poems together it becomes clear that dispossession is connected to the heart, insinuating that the act of dispossession is attached to the body rather than property. Spencer's articulation of dispossession as a bodily act becomes all the more impactful when she equates rest with decomposing into the landscape. Rather than finding rest through the accumulation of property in an act of possession, Spencer finds solace in losing the singularity associated with personhood and nourishing an entire ecosystem with her flesh. In this sense, Spencer rejects the human in the liberal sense, one associated with property ownership, as aspirational and instead posits the obliteration of a singular existence, an afterlife in the literal and material land.

Toward a New Ecology

Visitors can walk through Anne Spencer's Lynchburg house and garden, now a museum, and see the remnants of her life and the ecology she tended to extending into the present. The climbing wisteria, planted by Spencer herself, provides shade while the vibrant red phlox continues to reseed itself. As Spencer demonstrates at multiple points in her poetry, the garden exists far beyond her own life, suspending the past in the present moment. The often quoted line from "Any Wife to Any Husband," "This small garden is half my world" is followed immediately by "I am nothing to it-when all is said / I plant the thorn and kiss the rose / But they will grow when I am dead" (qtd. in Greene 186). The poem goes on to describe the speaker's husband in the garden with another woman but still sensing the dead gardener as a "shadowy third." And Spencer's garden has continued to grow, tended to by Lynchburg local Jane Baber White and her garden club. Couples take engagement and wedding photos under the blue trellis, and graduate students like me read her poetry under the shade provided by her wisteria. Spencer instructs us "toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame. A counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see" (Sharpe 117). Reading seed catalogs in excess of literature, seeing histories unfolding in the excess of a name, and a garden growing in excess of the social structures of white supremacy, Anne Spencer shows us how to really see.

Submission received 16 September 2022

Revised version accepted 25 March 2023

Works Cited

- Batsaki, Yota, et al., editors. *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016.
- Dungy, Camille T., editor. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. U of Georgia P, 2009.
- Dupree, A. Hunter. *Asa Gray: 1810-1888*. Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1959.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2004.
- Farr, Judith. *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard UP, 2005.
- Ferrari, Carlyn E. "Anne Spencer's 'Natural' Poetics." *CLA Journal-College Language Association*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2018, pp. 184 - 192.
- Frischkorn, Rebecca T., et al. *Half My World: The Garden of Anne Spencer, a History and Guide*. Warwick House Publishing, 2003.
- Glave, Dianne D. *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2010.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Karapetkova, Holly. "'CHATTERTON, SHELLEY, KEATS AND I': Reading Anne Spencer In the White Literary Tradition." *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 228 - 227.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (book)*: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999.
- Newkirk, Pamela. *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga*. Amistad, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2015.
- Roth, Matthew. "The 20th Century Rise of the Confederate Soybean." *Slate Magazine*. June 22, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/06/confederate-nostalgia-the-lost-cause-and-the-history-of-soybeans-in-the-south.html>
- Ruffin, Kimberly N. *Black On Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. U of Georgia P, 2010.
- Schiebinger, Londa L. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting In the Atlantic World*. Harvard UP, 2004.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Shockley, Evie. "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing': Poetry and Blackness Visualized." *New Literary History*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2019, pp. 499 - 528.
- Smith, Jane S. *The Garden of Invention: Luther Burbank and the Business of Breeding Plants*. Penguin Press, 2009.
- Spencer, Anne, et al. *Collection of Seed and Plant Catalogs From the Papers of Anne Spencer. 1945-1977*, 1945.
- Spencer, Anne. "Taboo." *Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum*. Online. <http://www.annespencermuseum.com/>
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Prose*. Open Road Integrated Media, LLC, 2011.

(Re)creating a Living Memorial: Urban Gardening as a More-than-human Co-creating Practice

JC Niala
University of Oxford, UK
jc.niala@anthro.ox.ac.uk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2023.14.1.4830>



Abstract

This essay explores what happened when I recreated an allotment in the style of the year 1918. The plot was located on a charity allotment site in the city of Oxford in the United Kingdom and cultivated during the growing season of 2020 to 2021. There have been people growing on the site for over a century. I planted open pollinated non-hybrid heritage seeds from the era. Reflecting on the use of landscape as an archive, I use both academic and creative responses to the soil as a repository of memory. The plot itself became a living memorial that diverse members of the public visited, to share food and engage with the plot and the themes it generated. These themes were the current COVID-19 pandemic, the 1918/1919 flu pandemic, and the First World War in Africa and Europe. In contrast to contested public memorials, the allotment garden space facilitated restoration. This essay therefore examines what can be enabled through a co-creating a multispecies gardening practice. It discusses whether the inclusion of nature enables a different engagement with challenging histories. By working with a store of memory within the natural world, the case study of the 1918 allotment demonstrates the ways in which it is possible to transcend both time and space, to open up counter narratives of key periods in global history. The 1918 allotment also offers up a methodological approach that works with the practice of decolonisation as “convivial” (Nyamnjoh). A meeting place for varied peoples and more-than-human others to come together in transformation, through urban gardening and working alongside and with more-than-human gardeners.

Keywords: Poetry, gardens, war, memorialization, more-than-human.

Resumen

Este ensayo híbrido explora lo que sucedió cuando recreé una parcela al estilo del año 1918. La parcela estaba ubicada en un sitio de adjudicación benéfica en la ciudad de Oxford en el Reino Unido, y se cultivó durante la temporada de cultivo de 2020 a 2021. La gente ha plantado cultivos en ese lugar durante más de un siglo. Yo planté semillas patrimoniales no híbridas de polinización abierta de la época. Reflexionando sobre el uso del paisaje como archivo, utilizo respuestas tanto académicas como creativas al suelo como depósito de la memoria. La parcela misma se convirtió en un monumento viviente que diversos miembros del público visitaron para compartir comida y relacionarse con la parcela y los temas que generó. Estos temas fueron la pandemia actual de COVID-19, la pandemia de gripe de 1918/1919 y la Primera Guerra Mundial en África y Europa. A diferencia de los memoriales públicos en disputa, el espacio del huerto facilitó la restauración. Por lo tanto, este ensayo examina lo que se puede conseguir a través de una práctica de jardinería multiespecies de co-creación. Discute si la inclusión de la naturaleza permite un compromiso diferente con historias desafiantes. Al trabajar con una reserva de memoria dentro del mundo natural, el estudio de caso de la parcela de 1918 demuestra las formas en que es posible trascender tanto el tiempo como el espacio, para abrir contra-narrativas de períodos clave en la historia global. La parcela de de 1918

también ofrece un enfoque metodológico que trabaja con la práctica de la descolonización como "agradable" (Nyamnjoh). Un lugar de encuentro para que pueblos variados se unan en la transformación, a través de la jardinería urbana y trabajando junto a y con jardineros más que humanos.

Palabras clave: Poesía, jardines, guerra, memorialización, más que humano.

"What does it mean to remember a previous pandemic as we struggle to heal in the current one?" (Niala 10). We ask a lot of gardens, both practically and in our imaginations. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous hero seeks immortality in the sumptuous garden of the sun god. This was a garden where leaves were gemstones and wisdom abounded. In the Christian tradition, the Garden of Eden calls to mind the "lost paradise" of the past (Milton), and in Islam the divine gardens await the virtuous after their death. What these mythological gardens remind us of is a sense of harmony and balance which, in the Anthropocene, we are acutely aware of having profoundly damaged. Amid the challenges of a world that many consider ruined, it is the garden that can offer a space of hope.

In practice, gardens offer more than a space of hope. Many of us turn to gardens for sustenance whether mental, physical, or spiritual in a quest to regain our own balance, and increasingly a balance that includes the more-than-humans with whom we share our gardens. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with its accompanying widespread lockdowns triggered a "global gardening boom" (Ossola). Researchers found that "gardening was overwhelmingly important for nature connection, individual stress release, outdoor physical activity and food provision" (Egerer et al. 127).

Concurrently, there were calls for the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic (and also the 1918-1919, so-called Spanish Flu, pandemic) to be memorialised. "Memorials are a vehicle that can assist in the transition from collective trauma to recovery" (Fox 69). Some people also began to ask why there were "almost no memorials of the flu of 1918" (Segal). Given the 1918-1919 pandemic coincided with the end of the First World War, its opportunity for memorialisation was, perhaps, subsumed by the concerns of an already exhausted world. The spread of the flu of 1918 has been linked to returning demobbed soldiers, leading the 1918-1919 pandemic to be "analysed as an effect of the war" (Gibbs 126). This entanglement of war and disease was re-examined in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic when publics, trying to make sense of the devastation and tragic loss of life, began to look to history for answers.

Around the start of the pandemic, in 2020, I had already been researching allotment gardening in the United Kingdom for nearly two years when a community horticulture and art project called "Fig" approached me. Sam, who runs the project, told me that Fig had a plot on Elder Stubbs Charity Allotment Site (hereafter referred to as Elder Stubbs) in Oxford. He offered it to me for a growing season to do whatever I wanted with it. Before Sam had a chance to take his next breath, I replied that I wanted to grow an allotment site in the style of the year 1918. I wanted to do so because numerous parallels were being drawn in the media between the COVID-19 pandemic and the 1918/1919 pandemic. 1918 was also the year that the First World War ended. Thus, the 1918 Allotment was born.

We used open pollinated, non-hybrid seeds of heritage plant varieties from the years around 1918, planting staples from the time including beetroot, carrot, spring onions, King Edward potatoes, cabbage, broccoli, onion, peas, radish, runner bean, kale, and turnip. There was already rhubarb and a patch of strawberries growing on the plot that we continued to cultivate. We used T.W. Sanders' book *Kitchen Garden and Allotment: A Simple Practical Guide to Home Food Production*, first published in 1918, in order to work with the growing methods that were used at the time.

Once the plants had begun growing and it was clear that there was going to be a harvest (though it turned out to be even larger than we imagined) we used Eventbrite to issue an invitation for people to come and engage with the plot as they saw fit. We provided food from the plot and some visitors also carried out some gardening. People from all across the UK and even a group of students from the US who were attending summer school in Oxford came to visit the plot. As well as the food and drink, I shared the poetry that I wrote as a part of the project and visitors spoke with each other, although some also spent time at the plot in silence. I also explained the practicalities of the project and that I was working with seeds from the era and gardening in the way that would have been practised around the time of the First World War.

As the project wore on and the number of visitors to the plot grew, some people began to ask about the extent to which the more-than-human participants in the project were facilitating the process of memorialisation across time. Visitors to the plot commented and wrote in the visitors' book that their experience was "multi-sensory," "embodied," and "hands on." They noted that they were engaging in a "relationship w/ [ith] the land." It was interesting to note that the visitors book itself bore traces of the plot by way of soil transferred from visitors' hands that stained at least one of the pages in the book.



1918 Allotment



Beans supported using methods from around 1918

Given the lack of memorialisation of the 1918-1919 pandemic, it seemed important to members of the public such as Mr. Zechinelli who lost his grandfather in the 1918-1919 pandemic to memorialise those who had lost their lives in both pandemics (Segal). However, the First World War was so intimately linked with the 1918-1919 pandemic that it could not be excluded from the memorialisation process. Gardens have a long association with war memorials across the UK (and indeed in many parts of the world). In Oxford, there is Christ Church War Memorial garden established in 1926 to memorialise the First World War. Further, allotment gardens such as the one I was cultivating are intimately entwined with British war history, having provided food for the nation during both World Wars (Way). Even so, gardens that are wartime memorials are not “stable containers of meaning but need to be actively (re)interpreted” (Callahan 360). As the 1918 Allotment was conceived as a living memorial, visitors to the garden also inscribed their own meaning on the site. One woman who brought her teenage son to the allotment visited on the date of her father’s birthday to remember him: he had been a child wartime allotmenteer.

The 1918 Allotment and this essay are also a response to the call for more ‘other-than-human’ ethnographies [that] draw attention to dimensions of life that have allegedly been overlooked or marginalised in anthropological writings... A singular focus on meaning, symbolism or utility has often side-lined other relational practices” (Lien and Pálsson 3). In this way the 1918 Allotment saw the allotment site as an assemblage of people, plants, insects. It was a gardening of things amongst others in order to ask, “How do gatherings sometimes become ‘Happenings,’ that is greater than the sum of their parts? If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities” (Tsing 23)? Or, leaning specifically into the 1918 Allotment, might an assorted collection of humans, more-than-humans and non-humans lead us to understand how living memorials can be co-created? What might this co-creation actually memorialise?

In this remainder of this essay, I draw on academic research and poetry to make sense of the events that occurred, and the themes that arose, during the growing season

of 2020-2021 as I was co-creating the 1918 Allotment. The essay drew inspiration from Donna Haraway, who advocates a speculative methodology:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 12)

In considering how to describe the landscape I work with the complexities of the one in which I was working. I use a Barthes-like textual analysis, which allows for the ideologies embedded within the landscape to be revealed (Barthes); I also include, in my analysis, social processes such as the relationships I was engaged with in observing the more-than-human worlds of the garden (Duncan and Duncan). Given the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the work was underpinned by an ethics of care, for example in the soils with which I was working that can be “perceived as endangered ecologies in need of urgent care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 23). As I worked to re-read the co-created landscape through poetry, it also became apparent that the form of text I chose was just as important as the descriptions it would contain. In this context, poetry proved apt because of its links with landscape memorialisation, gardens and war. The iconic poem “In Flanders Fields” by Canadian surgeon John McCrae, for example, led to the popular use of poppies as a flower of remembrance. The use of poppies is particularly poignant as they are a classic example of a landscape’s expression of ruderal ecology, their growth stimulated by the effects of shelling (Stoetzer). Replacing the after-effects of bombs with flowers is a poetic gesture, and poetry was an important element in the project.

Poetry has been noted for its “potential to transform ways of thinking and being in the world” (Weeber and Wright). It also allows for a method with which to witness the world. This witnessing and transformation are key features of memorialisation. The public call that took place in the UK for a memorialisation of those lost to the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the questioning of why there wasn’t a similar memorial for those who died in the 1918-1919 pandemic, spoke to the need “for a place for the bereaved to communicate not only with the deceased but also with the outside world” (Klaassens et al. 187).

I worked with poetry as a tool to engage with the project’s themes by reading, writing and sharing poetry with visitors to the site throughout the project. There were the links with the First World War as poetry in this and other wars around the world has been used to act “as a witness” (Eswaran 68). During the 1918 Allotment project, poetry was used to create temporal connections: to witness what happened before, record what is going on in the present, and suggest possible futures. Poetry also allows for speculation, a recognition of what is known but also a route to delve into what remains unknown.

María Puig de la Bellacasa has written compellingly about the way touch can bypass the visual sense. Touch is an inevitable part of the gardening practice on allotments and, when the first visitors to the 1918 Allotment put their hands in the soil, they commented on the sensation of touching the more-than-human soil. Even more, the sensation of being touched, something that so many were deprived of during lockdowns and sheltering in place, was a powerful part of visitors’ experience. Poetry provided a language and form for these speculations. What does it mean to be touched by soil? How do we know the soil has been touched?

Finally, poetry supported both a personal experience of being “the product of a single consciousness” (Minogue and Palmer 110) and a larger engagement with the multiple resonances of the poem for individual participants. Kodwo Eshun proposes human beings as “sensors” who reciprocally respond to the stimuli that we experience (Eshun). By sharing poetry on the 1918 Allotment and also using it to document and analyse the themes within it, the poetry aimed to track the sensory responses and transformation that the memorialisation afforded.

On the surface, all that occurred was that an urban gardener cultivated an allotment plot. Allotment gardening is something ordinary that has taken place on plots up and down the United Kingdom, growing season after growing season, for centuries. However, during the project it quickly became apparent that gardening is not neutral. *Where* people garden, *who* is doing the gardening, *how* they garden, *why* they garden and *what* they are gardening all matter. Further, even though the act of gardening may seem individual, happening in one place at a particular time, the presence of more-than-human gardeners (seeds, plants, weather, soil) shatters those spatial and temporal illusions. It makes memorialisation an active process both recalls and re-enacts. Recalling by remembering the people through the practices that have gone before and re-enacting by engaging in those same practices in the present day. There have been people cultivating on the Elder Stubbs site for over 100 years, but there are no elder trees on the site. To ask why involves a journey beyond the boundaries of the current site. We tend to think of gardens as static but, like people, they move. In the case of Elder Stubbs, the allotment site was moved over three miles, from where it is believed there likely was elder to its current location:

On the brow of limestone hills, a spring emerges. Wandering down toward the Thames, the water becomes Boundary Brook – named for its former role as outer boundary of Oxford city. Along the course of this brook alluvial green spaces hang like beads, among them Elder Stubbs allotments. This flood prone area, left out of medieval field systems, was dedicated at the time of enclosure for allotments when local people were turfed off common land further up the hill. (Greenhalgh 5)

Thus the 1918 Allotment, alongside the other allotments on Elder Stubbs, carried within it the presence of this geographic loss. The loss of common lands in the UK also carries legal, economic and emotional legacies in which both grief and anger are enmeshed. The latter is typified in the following anonymous poem which deftly summarises the loss of the commons:

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common,
But lets the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose. (Boyle 13)

Living in an age where there is only one village in the whole of England (Laxton) that still has living memory of common lands before enclosure, there is limited public space for an acknowledgement of the grief associated with this loss. The visitors to the 1918 Allotment both recognized what they thought it felt like to step into “paradise” and were nevertheless acutely aware that when they found themselves outside the allotment gates following their visit, they would no longer have direct access to this place that exposed hidden griefs.

English allotments are a curious piece of material cultural heritage. They are, “individual parcels of land allocated to individuals or households for personal use; while contiguous, the parcels are worked independently by each household and the land is made available through either government action or private entities. The participating individual households are organized into a self-governing association” (Drescher et al., 318). However, the relocation of the Elder Stubbs site is typical of how allotments across England began. Allotments are part of the result of the deracination of the landless poor. Rural allotments, the ancestors to urban allotments, are one of the results of the acts of enclosure across England (Burchardt). “Enclosure was the process that ended traditional rights, such as grazing livestock on common land, or cultivating arable crops on strips in open fields. Once enclosed the uses of the land became restricted to the owner” (Willes 51). This practice, which became enshrined in law through enclosure acts, had a profound impact on agricultural labourers as their independent access to fuel and food was restricted. Coupled with this restriction, they were already poorly paid. Allotments began to appear in enclosure acts in the seventeenth century, recognizing the need to make “some land provision for the poor” (Willes 115). The legal status of allotments saw a major shift in law in 1908 with the Small Holdings and Allotment Act. It is an act which underwent further strengthening until the 1925 Allotments Act, “which established statutory allotments which local authorities could not sell off or convert without Ministerial consent, known as Section 8 Orders” (The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardens).

Until recently, academic discourse on allotments was centred on the idea that their history is inextricably linked to services provided/not provided by the government. Before the welfare state, allotments were a way for financially poor families to feed themselves. During times of war or austerity, such as the measures brought in by the current English Conservative government, their popularity increased. Wartime allotments from the Second World War remain salient in the popular imagination through the “Dig for Victory” campaign that encouraged the public to turn every piece of land they could, including public parks and even Buckingham Palace gardens, into allotments to feed the nation. Fewer people are left to remember the “Dig for DORA” (Defence of the Realm Act) that made the same call during the First World War.

Although I knew that I would be reaching back to recover histories of cultivation, in recreating an allotment in the style of the year 1918, what I had not anticipated was the way the histories would be unearthed through the soil. One of the reasons that we expect so much from gardening is, perhaps, that the earth still has a routine and generous response despite the way we have treated the earth that has led to the Anthropocene.

The Practice: Using Poetry to Cultivate Thinking with the 1918 Allotment¹

Gardens begin in the imagination and so when Sam issued his invitation, by the time I had hung up from the Zoom call the 1918 Allotment already existed in my mind. There were the knowns such as my desire to use T.W. Sanders’ book as a guide, but there were the unknowns such as the weather: a more-than-human co-creator of gardens. What could I learn by being attentive to the effects of the more-than-human gardeners?

¹ My poems in the section below were published in *Portal: 1918 Allotment*.

Gardeners across the UK pay attention to the frost: the last frost marks the active start of the growing season. My body was indeed as sensor, as (Eshun) proposes, in responding to the messages, the strongest of which was learning to understand was within my control and what was not.

Waiting for the Last Frost

Snow has come again,
reminding us, whatever names,
seasons will be

I pour warm water
on the plants. An earthy
smell hits my cold nose

Gardening involves working with a constellation of more-than-human gardeners who each bring their own variables to the process, both welcome and unwelcome. It is a curious if obvious contradiction that although we speak of human beings as doing the gardening, we can't actually make plants grow. We can plant seeds and nurture them, but it is the plants who have to do the growing. Some gardeners such as Jason Kay see their role as trying to "influence" what it is the plants do. He feels that gardens where the gardener tries to exert their "control" are rendered cold and sterile (Kay). Working with heritage seeds felt like a homage to time. Planting King Edward potatoes not only linked the plot back to a 1902 coronation but also raised questions about what would have been a contemporary and popular potato in 1918. I was curious about who would have been roasting the potato, well known for its taste in 1918, and this in turn led me to think about the women who, even though not traditionally associated with allotment plots, kept them going when their husbands were at war. The poem that follows bears witness for a woman who might have been, offering a voice for the women whose voices were not routinely recorded.

Allotment Site Blues

After Robin Robertson

You'd know her plot
by the tidy trenches
piles of soil waiting
for King Edward's burial
eyes lined up to the amber sky.
You'd recognise the flimsy poppy
Marking hope for an un-blighted summer
soil lined with discarded daisy chains
made for her gurgling child.

Hers is a service the men won't notice
as they grumble about her beet
stained hands.

T'aint women's work to drive
a spade through the dirt,
who'll watch the baby?
Women's work's not on the land.

No normal lass would lift a sack of spuds
tie up the beans and spit on the ground.
T'aint right – the men say, they'll be sure to keep her pension

Here's the proof her behaviour's unsound.
They don't know the letters have stopped coming.
Her tears – not spit – bind and form the clay.
In the still of a clammy summer's evening
when she reaches for fruit from the highest bough
I'll wait ready to catch her should she fall.

Regardless of the extent to which gardeners feel that they are able to affect the plants that they interact with, we all acknowledge the plants' own agencies. While studying gardeners in the north of England, Cathrine Degnen found that the gardeners she worked with remarked on their plants' behaviour in various ways. Plants could be "quite well behaved," go "berserk," or be "confused." All of this suggests that plants, even those that have been specially selected and sown by human gardeners, also have a role in deciding where and how they are going to grow. Given this "reciprocal referencing" between plants and human beings, as Degnen points out, "the mechanistic model of self and body came to dominate all other ways of thinking about them in Western cultural settings ... when evidence to the contrary is all around us" (Degnen 164).

It is not only the dualistic ways in which we think that can be misleading. A key element when humans garden, is deciding which plants do or do not belong. These decisions can obscure the messages that plant gardeners are sending. Weeds (plants that sow themselves) are the name that human gardeners give to unwanted plant gardeners. They can be perceived as a threat by both human gardeners and domesticated plants, and yet from an archaeobotanical perspective, weeds are part of the clues that tell us how we came to plant domestication in the first place:

a large deposit of weeds may indicate instances of cultivation... We know that humans were modifying their immediate environments well before the Neolithic revolution by clearing land for local cultivation, creating spaces for refuse, and hunting and trapping. These activities created disrupted spaces that were suited to synanthropic plants (weeds). (D'Costa)

As D'Costa describes, the presence of plants, whether we are cognizant of it are not, communicates something to human gardeners. Communication can be to indicate the presence of human activity or, in some cases, it can be to demonstrate how the human activity occurred. I went on to harvest enough of the strawberries that were already growing on the plot to make jam for visitors to the plot. The strawberry patch indicated the presence (and taste – pun intended) of the human gardener who was there before me. The plants were also healthy despite the gap between two different gardeners' interventions, thus indicating they could also tend to themselves.

Other critical more-than-human gardeners on allotment plots are insects. Insects are the gardeners least likely to adhere to human boundaries. They are able to travel through the soil and the air, which means that they cover great distances and the most likely human barriers they face are usually fatal. Human beings' reactions to insects tend to be strong, polarised and regularly contradictory (Raffles). Insects are either recognised as friends, like the bees who are seen as indicator species and viewed in terms of their sociality, or foes, like wasps. Even bees are generally viewed positively when they are physically far away from humans, doing their pollinating job, but are far less welcome as solitary creatures who may decide to share a sugary drink with a human in the same garden. Despite the crucial role that many insects play in gardening, humans have been

responsible for the decimation of millions of insects (Carson). Mass crop spraying has led to a crisis in the populations of certain facilitators of pollination, with drastic action now being taken by human beings to try to protect certain species.

Human interactions with insects are revealing and the 1918 Allotment was no different. It is one thing to create a memorial by planting heritage seeds and eschewing the use of plastic. It is quite another to create a memorial by contributing to the death of living creatures. The metaphor of battle that can characterize human interactions with nature is unhappily real when it comes to some of the substances that we have used on our plants and ourselves. At the end of the First World War, pesticides were liberally applied across allotment sites across the country. Elder Stubbs would have been no different. There were films made for example by *The Smallholder Magazine* such as *Allotment Holders Enemies* to show allotmenters how to exterminate their “foes” in language that directly echoed that which had been used during the war.

In contrast, contemporary allotmenters mourn the devastating loss of these insects. Though interestingly some specifically grow poppies, in general allotmenters grow pollinator friendly plants in order to attract and support insects’ wellbeing. Thus over a couple of generations a loss has been recognised, and ornamental plants serve as mini living memorials to the insects lost in the wake of First World War technologies.

War poets like Wilfred Owen, who survived World War One, wrote about the horrific effects of the different types of nerve gasses that were used against human enemies. The words of the Belgian poet-soldier Daan Boens from his 1918 poem simply entitled *Gas* are especially moving:

The stench is unbearable, while death mocks back.
The masks around the cheeks cut the look of bestial snouts,
the masks with wild eyes, crazy or absurd,
their bodies drift on until they stumble upon steel.
The men know nothing, they breathe in fear.
Their hands clench on weapons like a buoy for the drowning.
They do not see the enemy, who, also masked, loom forth,
And storm them, hidden in the rings of gas.
Thus in the dirty mist, the biggest murder happens. (Feigenbaum 225)

Many commercial insecticides are chemical neurotoxins: substances designed to destroy pests through their nervous system and tailored to specific targets, human or insect. The connection between wars against people and wars against other species is one that has already been drawn by historians. Edmund P. Russell says that the two histories are impossible to separate and the human ability to destroy muddles distinctions between human and insect enemies (Russell). We are all part of the same wider nature and war is war. It is perhaps not surprising that ex-soldiers who turned to allotments on their return home were not squeamish about the use of arsenic to poison caterpillar grubs on fruit trees as demonstrated in the film *Allotment Holders Enemies* (1918). And yet I find it difficult to judge people who were gardening on allotments in 1918 harshly. The levels of poverty and hunger at the time were staggering and many people were thus involved in a life and death struggle with the insects on their plots. Engaging with the First World War also brought to light the histories of more-than-human gardeners who at times saved humans from themselves.

When I shared this poem in readings that took place on the 1918 Allotment the visitors’ responses often included a remark about the hidden losses that were a common

thread across both pandemics and the First World War. One visitor wrote in the visitors' book how the poem's hidden griefs "resonated with my experience during lockdown' but also the importance to make 'connections to other times."

Battle of Tanga, 3-5 November 1914

It matters where you place a war
But no white man cared to trace African soils
so enclosed in trenches of tropical heat

Askaris fought Wahindi
As outnumbered German troops
were not outgunned.

Sleepless bees descended like vuli rains

Stinging cornered foreign forces
caught between sword and sea.

Who knew that bees could win a battle?
Their lives a routine sacrifice
for honey we find so sweet.

Working with the Landscape as an Archive – Soil, People, Memory

T.W. Sanders' book was both a guide on how to cultivate the 1918 Allotment as well as an insightful journey through gardening history. Chapter Two on "Manure and Fertilisers," for example, shows the continuations of, and breaks from, particular gardening practices. Animal dung, bone meal and seaweed are still commonly used on allotment sites. What is less common is the use of oyster shell and leather parings. One fertiliser that he proposes that drew my attention was blood meal, including his detailed description on how to prepare the blood.

Blood meal is a nitrogen-rich fertiliser. It is also linked to deterring deer and rabbits and so is a gentler way to deal with "vegetable foes," as Sanders calls them (Sanders). However, too much blood can burn plants, so Sanders gives careful and detailed instructions about how to use it. As I continued to work with Sanders' book, thoughts of World War One swirling around in my head, I began to see the words on the pages differently. I "found" this poem amongst the lines about how to cultivate beetroot:

thrust
the blade down deeply
press back the handle,
Twist

Although the poem startled me and reminded me of the use of bayonets, it also spoke to me of the response that the earth can have to the violence that human beings enact. Even gardening, which we think of as a peaceful activity, has within it practices of aggression against the more-than-humans with whom we garden. I am thinking, here, of the worms I have accidentally split in half while digging the ground. Sometimes, these acts are more deliberate, and yet the earth often still chooses to return us to a place of hope. During World War One we blew up the ground, spilling blood, and the earth replied with a burst of astonishingly beautiful flowers.

As my thoughts and the plot continued to grow, they both began to draw people. As I began to prepare for visitors to the site, I started to look at it differently. I thought about a local archaeologist Dr Olaf Bayer and when he dug a test pit on another of Fig's plots on the same site. He found what he thought was the transition line where people would have been cultivating their allotment plots in previous decades. It turns out that the line was only eight inches away (Greenhalgh). In less than a foot, I could reach out and touch the same soil that fed the people who lost their access to the commons three miles away. Particles of that soil could have been feeding my guests. I wondered on this piece of land what memories were now rising to the fore?

It could be argued that allotment sites and their imagination work in what Pierre Nora describes as "lieux de memoire" or places of memory: places that fulfil a specific purpose in the "play of memory and history," which is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial—just as if gold were the only memory of money—all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs" (Nora 19). Allotment sites are much beloved by the English public. In the two years carrying out my research prior to the 1918 Allotment project, I noticed people referred to allotment sites with something almost like reverence. The public are hugely appreciative of their existence whether they had ever had or ever intended to have an allotment plot themselves. This approval has only been heightened since the widespread public uptick in environmental concerns: allotments are green spaces in cities and as such recognised for the potential benefits they hold, for example, in terms of biodiversity. Their strong association with the Second World War also means that allotments as a whole are recognised as more-than-human actors in the British war effort. This is critical as

The Second World War remains central to contemporary understandings of Britain and British national identity. In particular, the epochal events of 1940—Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz—are said to have heightened a sense of British national consciousness. Churchill contemporaneously proclaimed this period as Britain's "Finest Hour." (Ugolini)

Allotments serve as both an important part of British national identity a physical location where people can interact with a wider landscape in a collective space and yet individually make their *own* place on the land that they cultivate. This is a unique space where, "the politics of land and landscape are part of...[an] everyday experience" (Crouch 266). In this delicate dance between individual practice and collective identity, the memories held by and associated with allotment sites are particularly potent. In the Euro-American context, "memory ... is most commonly thought of as an individual faculty – the diverse processes which shape how individuals recollect, transform and erase the past" (Cole 1). Yet, allotment sites also hold a collective memory which allows both for an active reproduction of amongst other things identity but also a memorialisation of a time that has passed.

In my work with allotment landscapes as an archive, a critical place to read was the soil. It is now established within soil science that the soil has a memory (Janzen). To apprehend this begins with the understanding that soil is alive. It is a mixture of organic and inorganic matter that actively participates with the organisms that dwell in it. It is in constant communication with the plants that grow in it and provides a home and structure for the various species that operate from it.

From the perspective of soil science, the memory in the soil works in four different ways. The soil remembers the environmental factors that affected its formation and continuing development (Phillips and Lorz). It is a repository for historical artefacts (Pietsch) such as the clay pipes and pottery sherds that are ubiquitous across allotments sites in Oxford. It also captures the evidence of changes that take place within it, for example, an event causing erosion even after the erosion is no longer evident (Daněk et al.). Finally, there is also another kind of memory that is held in the soil, a memory that bears the traces of the actions that we have carried out on and with it. This memory has been recognised for far longer and is of great importance during the Anthropocene. “There exists ... in external material nature, an ineffaceable, imperishable record ... of every act done, every word uttered, nay, of every wish and purpose and thought conceived by mortal man, from the birth of our first parent to the final extinction of our race” (Marsh 248-9). This record is directly traceable in the soil: “In a very real sense the land does not lie; it bears a record of what [humans] write on it” (Lowdermilk 1).

What was written into the soils in Elder Stubbs? The answer in part came from my sister project carried out simultaneously on another of Fig’s sites. While I was planting into the ground, the artist Nor Greenhalgh was digging it up and finding out what clays and colours lay within the earth at Elder Stubbs. It was not an extractive practice: once her project was done, she returned the soils along with natural offerings made by participants in her workshops, “secret prayer[s] written in vegetable ink and concealed in clay” (Greenhalgh 32). The answer she found was so obvious it was almost startling. It was the diversity. An abundance of colours from which Nor made inks bled through the soil—pinkish red beets, immortal ochres and elder blues. Fragments of pottery revealed at least twelve designs, both below and above ground; there was more than one of everything, a plurality of plants, people and practices.

When I combined this understanding with the experience that I had had on the 1918 Allotment and reflected on visitors’ responses to the plot, I concluded that what was also unearthed was the need for communal spaces where people could together and acknowledge hidden losses. There was the contemporary loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, but there was also a lack of memorialisation of the large numbers of people who lost their lives as a result of the 1918-1919 pandemic, leaving people without a physical memorial space for this historical link. Allotments had come about in part because of the loss of the commons and the end of the First World War had unleashed another type of warfare, this time chemical, on the landscape resulting in a loss of biodiversity. The visitors’ book had more than one response that referred to the visceral engagement of the senses and the benefits of gardening being “all encompassing.” What I found was that like the soil memorialisation has many layers: the theme of loss draws into itself many forms of remembrance regardless of what caused the individual losses in the first place. The themes raised and their joining with the plot and eating its produce highlighted that a multi-species space had been co-created more-than-humans which allowed visitors to remember. It was more than a space of remembrance, the woman who wrote in the visitor’s book that she “came on my late father’s birthday” surmised it was “a truly healing experience.”

Submission received 14 July 2022

Revised version accepted 28 February 2023

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland and Annette Lavers. *Mythologies: Selected and Translated from the French*. Hill And Wang, 1972.
- Boyle, James. "Fencing off Ideas: Enclosure & the Disappearance of the Public Domain." *Daedalus*, vol. 131, no. 2, 2022, p. 13.
- "Brief History of Allotments – the National Allotment Society – National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners Ltd." *The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardens*, 2019. www.nsalg.org.uk/allotment-info/brief-history-of-allotments/
- Burchardt, Jeremy. *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873*. Boydell Press, 2002.
- Callahan, William A. "Cultivating Power: Gardens in the Global Politics of Diplomacy, War, and Peace." *International Political Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2017, pp. 360–379, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olx017>.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Mariner Books, 2002.
- Cole, Jennifer. "Foreword: Collective Memory and the Politics of Reproduction in Africa." *Africa*, vol. 75, no. 01, 2005, pp. 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.1.1>.
- Crouch, David. "The Allotment, Landscape and Locality: Ways of Seeing Landscape and Culture." *Area*, vol. 21, 1989, pp. 261–267.
- D'Costa, Krystal. "Green Thumbery: What Can the First Weeds Tell Us?" *Scientific American Blog Network*, 2016, blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/green-thumbery-what-can-the-first-weeds-tell-us/.
- Daněš, Pavel, et al. "Forest Floor Alteration by Canopy Trees and Soil Wetness Drive Regeneration of a Spruce-Beech Forest." *Forest Ecology and Management*, vol. 504, 2022, p. 119802, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2021.119802>.
- Degen, Cathrine. "On Vegetable Love: Gardening, Plants, and People in the North of England." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2009, pp. 151–167, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.01535.x>.
- Drescher, A, et al. *Urban Homegardens and Allotment Gardens for Sustainable Livelihoods: Management Strategies and Institutional Environments*. *Tropical Homegardens*. Springer, 2006.
- Duncan, J, and N Duncan. "(Re)Reading the Landscape." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1988, pp. 117–126, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d060117>.
- Egerer, Monika, et al. "Gardening Can Relieve Human Stress and Boost Nature Connection during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3946403>.
- Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. Quartet Books, 1998.
- Eswaran, Aparna. "Mother as Witness: Poetry by Tamil Women in Sri Lanka." *South Asian Review*, 2020, pp. 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2020.1795519>.
- Feigenbaum, Anna. *Tear Gas*. Verso, 2017.
- Fox, Nicole. "Memorialization and COVID-19." *Contexts*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2020, pp. 69–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504220977941>.
- Gibbs, Pat. "Empire, Dissidence and Disease. The Impact of the First World War on the Molteno District of the Eastern Cape, 1914–1919." *Britain and the World*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2020, pp. 126–148, <https://doi.org/10.3366/brw.2020.0347>.
- Greenhalgh, Eleanor. *Elder Vernacular*. Fig, 2021.

- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Janzen, H. Henry. "The Soil Remembers." *Soil Science Society of America Journal*, vol. 80, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1429–1432, <https://doi.org/10.2136/sssaj2016.05.0143>.
- Jean Pascal Zanders. *Innocence Slaughtered: Gas and the Transformation of Warfare and Society*. Unicorn Press, 2016.
- Kay, Jason. "Garden in a City: Why Do We Garden?" *The Guardian*, 21 Mar. 2014, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/21/garden-city-why.
- Klaassens, Mirjam, et al. "Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective." *Mortality*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2009, pp. 187–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270902808068>.
- Lien, Marianne Elisabeth, and Gisli Pálsson. "Ethnography beyond the Human: The "Other-Than-Human" in Ethnographic Work." *Ethnos*, 2019, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1628796>.
- Lowdermilk, W.C. *Conquest of the Land through 7,000 Years*. District of Columbia: District of Columbia: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, 1953.
- Marsh, George. *Man and Nature*. NC. Scribner & co, 1869.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Philip Pullman, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Minogue, Sally, and Andrew Palmer. *The Remembered Dead Poetry, Memory and the First World War*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Niala, JC. *Portal: 1918 Allotment*, Fig, 2022.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, vol. 26, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis B, and Basler Afrika Bibliographien. *Decolonising the Academy: A Case for Convivial Scholarship*. Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2020.
- Ossola, Alessandro. "The Pandemic's Gardening Boom Shows How Gardens Can Cultivate Public Health." *The Conversation*, 21 Apr. 2022, theconversation.com/the-pandemics-gardening-boom-shows-how-gardens-can-cultivate-public-health-181426.
- Phillips, Jonathan D., and Carsten Lorz. "Origins and Implications of Soil Layering." *Earth-Science Reviews*, vol. 89, no. 3-4, 2008, pp. 144–155, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earscirev.2008.04.003>.
- Pietsch, Dana. "Krotovinas — Soil Archives of Steppe Landscape History." *CATENA*, vol. 104, 2013, pp. 257–264, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.catena.2012.12.003>.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. U of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Raffles, Hugh. *Insectopedia*. Vintage Books, 2011.
- Russell, Edmund. *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Sanders, T.W. *Kitchen Garden and Allotment a Simple Practical Guide to Home Food Production*. W.H. & L Colingridge, 1918.
- Segal, David. "Why Are There Almost No Memorials to the Flu of 1918?" *The New York Times*, 14 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/1918-flu-memorials.html.
- Sekine, Emily. "What Is Anthropological Poetry?" *SAPIENS*, 30 Aug. 2022, www.sapiens.org/culture/what-is-anthropological-poetry/.
- Stoetzer, Bettina. *Ruderal City*. Duke University Press, 2022.

“The Allotment Holder’s Enemies (1918).” BFI, www2.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b6a244acd.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Ugolini, W. “Britain and the Second World War: Identity and Remembrance.” *British Online Archives*, 2018, microform.digital/boa/posts/category/articles/84/britain-and-the-second-world-war-identity-and-remembrance.

Way, Twigs. *Allotments*. Shire Publications, 2008.

Weeber, Christine & Wright, Justin D. 2022. *What is anthropological poetry?* <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/what-is-anthropological-poetry/>

Willes, Margaret. *The Gardens of the British Working Class*. Yale University Press, 2014.

Le Jardin d'Allah: Ecological Sensibilities in the Francophone Caribbean

Chiara Lanza

IUSS Pavia and University of Ferrara, Italy

chiara.lanza@iusspavia.it

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4826>



Abstract

When gardening and Caribbean islands are mentioned, one cannot but think of Jamaica Kincaid and of the way in which she has articulated the complex relationship between colonialism and gardens, between people and notions such as place and situatedness. The very idea of nature in the Caribbean is strongly connoted, bearing the brunt of age-old associations with exoticism, mystery, unpredictability, or even madness. The symbolic meanings gardens take on in this region are therefore numerous and multifaceted, and if some have been lengthily discussed, others might still be worth exploring. Such is the case of backyards and vegetable gardens in Maryse Condé's *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux*: in a violence-torn, poverty-afflicted, and politically unstable Haiti, the orphaned Movar makes people's lives more bearable by recreating beauty around them, and by giving order to their unruly surroundings. His actions are more than a simple imposition of man over nature, they are also a metaphoric restoration of a lost balance, long forgotten because of other men's blind exploitation of both human and natural resources in an environment rendered all the more fragile by its fluctuating weather patterns. This paper presents some considerations on Caribbean soil ecologies, with a particular focus on Guadeloupe and Haiti, and on the ways in which the gardener-garden relationship might contribute to restoring damaged ecosystems. Through the character of Movar and the Jardin d'Allah he tends to, concepts such as care time, reciprocal gardening and plant agency are explored. The precarious contexts in which acts of gardening take place allow for the words of Maryse Condé to be read as a paradigm for finding rootedness and balance in a politically, socially, and ecologically suffering world. Finally, Movar's story is translated on a global scale, as an effective model of social sustainability and responsibility.

Keywords: Agroecology, francophone literature, gardening, soil ecology, the Caribbean.

Resumen

Cuando se habla de jardinería y las islas del Caribe, no se puede dejar de pensar en Jamaica Kincaid, especialmente en la forma en que articula la compleja relación entre el colonialismo y los jardines, entre las personas y las nociones de lugar y situación. La idea misma de la naturaleza en el Caribe tiene un fuerte significado, en la peor de las situaciones asociándola con el exotismo, el misterio, la imprevisibilidad, o incluso la locura. Los significados simbólicos que los jardines adquieren en esta región son, por lo tanto, numerosos y multifacéticos, y si algunos han sido discutidos a lo largo de la historia, otros aún podrían merecer ser explorados. Tal es el caso de los patios y huertos de *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* de Maryse Condé, quien habla de un Haití desgarrado por la violencia, afligido por la pobreza y políticamente inestable, en el que el huérfano Movar hace que la vida de la gente sea más soportable al recrear la belleza a su alrededor, y dando orden a su entorno rebelde. Sus acciones son más que una simple imposición del hombre sobre la naturaleza, son también una restauración metafórica de un equilibrio perdido, olvidado hace mucho tiempo debido a la explotación ciega de otros hombres de los recursos humanos y naturales en un medio ambiente hecho aún más frágil por sus patrones climáticos fluctuantes. Este artículo presenta algunas consideraciones sobre las ecologías del suelo del Caribe con un enfoque particular en Guadalupe y

Haití, específicamente sobre las formas en que la relación jardinero-jardín pueden contribuir a la restauración de los ecosistemas dañados. A través del carácter de *Movar* y el *Jardin d'Allah*, se exploran conceptos como el tiempo de cuidado, la jardinería recíproca y la agencia vegetal. Los contextos precarios en los que tienen lugar los actos de jardinería permiten que las palabras de Maryse Condé se lean como un paradigma para encontrar enraizamiento y equilibrio en un mundo que sufre de manera política, social y ecológica. Finalmente, la historia de *Movar* se traduce a escala global, como un modelo efectivo de sostenibilidad y responsabilidad social.

Palabras clave: Agroecología, literatura francófona, jardinería, ecología del suelo, el Caribe.

Introduction: Caribbean Agroecologies

In a 2017 study, Briana N. Berkowitz and Kimberly E. Medley observed how gardenscapes on the Caribbean island of St. Eustatius contributed to enriching degraded land and to sustainable landscape management. Their 14 case studies showed high species density and diversity, with a total of 277 species in about five acres of land (1). The diversity of both biotic and abiotic components is essential, not only in terms of ecosystem health but also with reference to resource use: diversifying means making farms more autonomous, more stable, and less reliable on external energy inputs, such as fossil fuels or chemical fertilisers (Caporali 30). As a consequence, heterogeneity positively affects the water cycle and contrasts soil erosion and loss of fertility, besides contributing to the aesthetic quality of the landscape (41). Furthermore, Berkowitz and Medley's study emphasised how human communities were created around gardens, and how local knowledge was shared, preserved, and enriched by these exchanges, which in turn fostered the physical and psychological wellbeing of gardeners (3). This study foregrounds the importance of backyards and vegetable patches as both physical refuges and as nonmaterial spaces, capable of hosting a variety of flora and fauna while also satisfying humans' needs in terms of fulfilment and beauty.

These sites of emergence stand out in opposition to landscapes of extinction and erasure, such as those of single-crop plantations, which characterised the colonial past as well as the present of many Caribbean islands. In Guadeloupe, for instance, sugarcane is the most common crop, followed by grasslands for livestock production and banana fields. Both sugarcane and bananas are export crops, intended for European markets (Sierra et al. 255). Export crops represent an important limiting factor to the sustainability of agroecosystems, due to the pollution caused by the intensive use of pesticides and N fertiliser (Don Roger; Sierra et al.). In a 2022 article on Polynesian oil palm plantations, anthropologist Sophie Chao interestingly equates extensive monocultures with extractive industries, arguing that extraction is a "central operative" of such sites of displacement and emplacement, characterised by a large-scale, regulated, and industrial regime aimed at yanking out as much value as possible from the land and its inhabitants (170). "The plant's biotic vitality (its genes, growth, germination, and more)", Chao writes, "are worked upon and put to work as a form of vegetal labour" (173). The human labour force is subjected to this regime of extraction too, rooted in the colonial logic of violence that

permeates the Plantationocene, a term denoting the “devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations” (Haraway 206).

These two poles—colonial violence and exploitation of natural resources—characterise what scholar Malcom Ferdinand names “the double fracture” (2). The colonial and environmental double fracture calls for new ways of thinking to highlight the extent to which “both historical colonization and contemporary structural racism are at the center of destructive ways of inhabiting the Earth” (11). Thinking about and with the Caribbean means bringing these fractures together.

The Caribbean is the main setting of Maryse Condé’s 2010 novel *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux*. The author, born in Guadeloupe in 1937, has been awarded many respected literary prizes, including the Alternative Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018. *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* narrates a dynamic and multi-layered story that moves across a wide range of spaces and time frames, thanks to the memories and recollections of its diverse characters. In “De la parole-racine à la parole-rhizome: La Voix de la nature comme guide chez Maryse Condé”, Ellen Munley defines this novel as a “rhizomatic book that answers to a world in crisis” (187).¹ This rhizomatic structure allows for multiple storylines to intersect, with most events taking place first in Guadeloupe and then in Haiti. Babakar Traoré, the protagonist, is an obstetrician from Mali, the son of a headteacher in a small Malian village and of a Guadeloupean émigré. His story is related in successive chapters, each taking a step back from the main narrative to cast a light on a particular aspect of his previous life, or on his reasons for being in Guadeloupe, far from his native land and from the years of violence and strife that characterised his life in the village of Éburnéa. Guadeloupe is, however, not described as a safe place either: the increasing number of Haitian refugees causes tensions and suspicion, and the atmosphere seems suffocating. The awareness that “one day, everything will disappear” (Condé 21) under the rising sea levels accretes the sinking motion which gradually engulfs the story and its characters. The voice of nature is indeed an important element in many of Condé’s storyworlds (Munley 178), and emerges with force in her 2010 novel, where nature is both described as a threat and a safe space. The present paper proposes to analyse the latter by focusing on gardenscapes, and how they fit in the historical, cultural, and agroecological context of the Caribbean islands in question.

Particular attention will be devoted to the character of Movar Pompilius. Movar is an orphaned Haitian immigrant who grew up in the unsettling climate of Haiti in the 1990s. Then, the country was just emerging from a long period of Duvalierism, which J. Michael Dash defines as “one of the most vicious manifestations of the Haitian state and eighteen years of civil strife and political machinations” (8). Lavalas’ party, with its “unrestrained wielding of state power” and president Aristide’s “attempt to mobilize the masses behind a patrimonial leader” (8) turned out to be the cause of further bloodshed. It is in this context that Movar, first working as an escort for Aristide’s militiamen and then as a watchman in a depot of illegal firearms, resolves to run away, and arrives in

¹All translations from French are my own, if not otherwise stated.

Guadeloupe. Not only does he meet Babakar there, but he also discovers his love for trees, vegetables, and flowers. Through gardening, he starts a process of liberation from his own and his country's authoritarian past.

Garden Plots: Human-Soil Relations

As mentioned above, Caribbean lands are scarred by the colonial past of the region both in terms of soil impoverishment and of their history of slavery and exploitation. Understanding this double fracture is paramount to framing current projects and approaches to landscape administration. This section aims to analyse in more detail the characteristics of soils in Guadeloupe and Haiti, and to explore how Movar's story fits into these varied contexts and landscapes. With reference to soil classification, both islands present heterogeneous soil types, ranging from Vertisols and Ferralsols in the former (Chopin, Sierra 2) to Cambisols and Luvisols (Gardi et al. 162) in the latter.² Their varied characteristics require different management strategies that take into account the pressures of intensive agriculture and of past improper land use. Vertisols, for instance, are clayey soils that, because of a dry-wet climatic regime, show deep fractures during dry seasons. Because of their peculiar properties, they require special cultivation practices, also considering that their behaviour constitutes a limit to root growth (IUSS Working Group WRB 180-181). However, the high urbanisation rate, coupled with an export agriculture system, does not always allow for appropriate and sustainable farming techniques to be deployed, thus leading to significant land degradation in the region (Hylkema 8). Furthermore, monocultures have often been accompanied by land-clearing, an activity which, by provoking the reduction of plant cover, entails a decreased accumulation of organic matter and a greater risk of soil erosion (R.K. Cunningham 342). The characters in *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* do not fail to notice signs of impoverished soil health. The Haitian landscape, for instance, is likened both to a "lunar expanse" with "sparse, brownish tufts of grass" (209), to a spectacular landscape (165), and to a lost paradise, where the banana, mango, and kapok trees that were once part of it do not grow anymore because of intensive deforestation (166). Deforestation, defined by Ferdinand as an "act of colonial inhabitation" (30), is the cause of depleted and drier soil profiles, besides being one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss (Giam 5777). In order to contrast soil erosion and restore fertility, agroecological practices can be applied, being agroecology a farming technique based on the diversification and valorisation of natural resources (Rabhi, loc. 821).

Even though diversity can also be achieved in complex agroecosystems, it is more easily monitored in small-scale plots. In this sense, gardening could be seen as a path toward both soil restoration and recovery of new meanings in the Caribbean region. Gardens do indeed resonate with multiple and contrasting meanings, being both spaces

² The IUSS Working Group WRB has defined Vertisols as "heavy clay soils with a high proportion of swelling clays", and Ferralsols as the "red or yellow soils" typical of "the humid tropics". The term Cambisol denotes "soils with at least an incipient subsurface soil formation", while Luvisols are soils with a high "clay content in the subsoil" due to processes of clay migration (152-180).

of imperial desire (as in botanical gardens) and slave resistance (Bourg Hacker 6-10). With reference to the latter, resistance to the plantation regime flourished in “mountain ranges, mangrove swamps, provision grounds” (DeLoughrey et al. 3), all spaces of regeneration and re-assertion of the self in relationship with the land. Provision grounds, in particular, provided slaves with the material and imaginative means to restore connections with their root cultures, through the cultivation of “indigenous and African [...] subsistence foods such as yams, cassava, and sweet potatoes” (DeLoughrey 58). Often unfertile or deemed unfit for the cultivation of export crops, these plots represented a way of keeping alive the connection with the soil, despite the alienating experience of diaspora and transplantation that supported the region’s economy. “This excavation of the provision grounds”, DeLoughrey writes, “reflects the historical plot of cultural sustainability amid the terrors of plantation capitalism, vital ground for the post-emancipation period” (59). It was indeed in and around these peripheral spaces, at the same time physically within and imaginatively beyond the controlled plantation boundaries, that identities were reshaped and self-assertion took form. Through provision grounds, “slaves themselves created and controlled a secondary economic network [...] which allowed for the construction of an alternative way of life” (Tomich 69), while also allowing for a possible escape route to take form via an individual or a collective liberation process. Thus, provision grounds were both sites of ecological resistance to coffee, sugar, or rubber monocultures, and of “cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system” (Wynter 100).

The plantation-plot dichotomy and gardens’ multiple connotations resonate in the work of Antiguan-American novelist Jamaica Kincaid, which has been essential in framing the interplay of history, culture, and ecology in the region. In particular, her contributions to the topic of gardening have become pivotal in any discussion in and around (colonial) gardens. In an interview, she claimed that “the real beginning of the empire was [the] relationship between labour and plants” (Lund, 6:07-6:14), and stresses the importance that naming had in the colonisation process. Her 1999 book, titled *My Garden (Book)*: is devoted to exploring such issues: the author re-imagines the Caribbean landscape, and the home garden in particular, as a material space where to reclaim her identity and culture. Through the garden the past is re-negotiated in a sort of “exercise in memory”, as she writes in the first pages of her book: “The garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (The Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)” (7-8). Remembering also entails a deconstruction of “imperialist environmental discourses and plantation’s mass commercial production and alienation” (Bourg Hacker 4), both enabled by the act of tending to gardens, figuratively and materially.

In *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* these tensions between past violence and present reappropriation become visible in the scarred landscapes where dirt, dryness, and beauty coexist. Haiti is alternately described as displaying “sumptuous landscapes” (246), “tawny mountains with barren slopes” (264), and garbage dumps on beaches (46). By contrast, the gardens and backyards tended by Movar are thriving and biodiverse

spaces, filled with the colours of orchids (77), hummingbirds (145), and various vegetables, such as peas and peppers (202). In this sense, these gardens could be interpreted as sites where the colonial and environmental double fracture gets healed.

This process of liberation does not solely involve the Caribbean's past, but also personal experience. After years spent in fear and solitude, Movar's acts of gardening and kinship-making perform a healing function. Once in Guadeloupe, he manages to find balance and fulfilment only by connecting simultaneously with Reinette (an immigrant like him, who dies in childbirth at the beginning of the novel), the Malian doctor Babakar, and his natural surroundings, as represented and enclosed in the different backyards he tends throughout the story. What distinguishes these patches of land from others is the peculiar relationship Movar establishes with and in them, thanks to his role as gardener or *homo gardinus* (Rodrigues 95), which charges him with a heightened sense of responsibility and purpose. The same effect is not produced in the "Ferme Modèle" where he is employed to raise chickens, turkeys, and guinea fowls; around fifty employees work there, and no mention of a meaningful connection between humans and non-human animals is made (Condé 54). During his free time, however, Movar discovers that other ways of being-in-the-world are possible:

Above all, I worked in the garden. There, I discovered that I love trees, vines, plants, flowers. I should have been born in another country, and not in a slum made of corrugated iron and planks. With the rain that wouldn't stop falling, I had much to do. In two days, if I wasn't careful, weeds would surround us.³

The above passage marks the entrance of *homo gardinus* into the story. *Homo gardinus* embodies, in Rodrigues' formulation, the attitude of "gardeners from all times who, by taking care of others—the plants—have helped build a Paradise on Earth" (95). This attitude, instantiated by Movar, bears a number of consequences. First of all, as Diogo et al. point out, values such as care and engagement often characterise the relationship between humans and the garden space they tend to (10), a relationship that, in spite of its anthropocentric essence, can also be mutually beneficial. Secondly, the multi-species encounters that become possible in highly biodiverse patches of land contribute to shaping a future-oriented and more sustainable world vision. Movar's being-in-the-world (or, in this case, his being-in-the-garden) is, as in the Heideggerian sense of the term *Dasein*, also a being-with. The first person plural, "nous", in the last sentence, could refer to Movar and Reinette alone, but also to the community that has emerged through his own acts of tending a small patch of land; weeds, if not controlled, could indeed choke the other plants that are trying to grow. Pulling out weeds is defined by indigenous biologist and thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer as one end of a bargain between planter and plants (126). Care is reciprocated with fruits, vegetables, and flowers. It is a partnership, a give-and-take exchange able to "restore relationship between land and people" (126) but also, in Movar's case, able to restore his own sense of belonging and self-confidence. Hence, his

³ Surtout, je travaillais dans le jardin. C'est là que j'ai découvert que j'aime les arbres, les lianes, les plantes, les fleurs. J'aurais dû naître dans un autre pays et pas dans un bidonville en tôles et en planches. Avec cette pluie qui n'en finissait pas de tomber, j'avais beaucoup à faire. En deux jours, si je ne faisais pas attention, les herbes nous encerclaient. (56)

acts of gardening establish a sort of dialogue with the islands' colonial legacy: thanks to this activity, performed in his free time, he re-enacts the fight for freedom and for the affirmation of the self against a hostile and violent society.

Planting Connections

The bond that is established between Movar and his more-than-human surroundings is a *fil rouge* throughout the story, and the author's way of inscribing beauty on a violence-torn scenario. As Rabhi writes in *Manifeste pour la Terre et l'Humanisme* (2008), it is in the very middle of horror that some men manage to show the beauty and power of compassion, sharing, self-restraint, and respect of life in all of its forms (loc. 1148-1167). The main characters' lives in Guadeloupe are indeed marked by increasing internal tensions and by ongoing violence directed against Haitian immigrants. This island was in fact one of the landing places for Haitians during the diaspora that started in the mid-1970 and continued in the following decades (Brodwin 389). Exclusion, mistrust, or even open hostility and deportation, legalised by the 1993 Pasqua laws, marked the experiences of migrants. Condé manages to convey this atmosphere of discomfort and insecurity by relating a succession of events that culminates in a sudden fire that reduces Movar's house, and plausibly the garden too, to ashes. Babakar does not hesitate to help and to offer his friend a shelter. As if following Movar's migrations from one house to another, the garden imposes its material presence once again, resurfacing in Babakar's backyard more beautiful than before:

Soon, Movar showed he was not ungrateful. He set to work and transformed a plot where weeds grew into a real Garden of Allah. People came from distant neighbourhoods to admire his orchids. In addition, he set up a vegetable garden and picked tomatoes, pumpkins, carrots, and aubergines as heavy as women's breasts.⁴

Plants do not solely contribute to the characters' sustenance, but also to the garden's aesthetic qualities. The garden could indeed be described as a space of aesthetic engagement, in which appreciation is not static or passive but requires instead active involvement in the natural processes of plant growth. It is noteworthy that the aesthetic potential is here actualised by the orchids, a symbol of magnificence and luxuriousness. In addition to their attractiveness, these flowers are renowned for the obsession they stirred in European voyagers and plant collectors who turned, during the 18th and 19th centuries, into the real orchid-hunters of the tropics (Angheliescu et al. 524). If the Caribbean garden can be configured as a "space of imperial desire" (Knepper 42), the presence of orchids makes it ambiguously so, being these flowers figuratively and etymologically related to the male reproductive organ and, consequently, to sexual intercourse (Singh and Duggal 400). Their power of seduction, resulting from the "belief that the larger tubers of orchids had stimulatory, generative and curative benefits for the

⁴ Movar prouva bientôt qu'il n'était pas un ingrat. Il se mit à l'œuvre et transforma un périmètre où poussaient librement chiendent et herbes de Guinée en un véritable Jardin d'Allah. Les gens sortirent d'aussi loin que Vieux-Habitants pour venir admirer ses orchidées. En outre, il aménagea un potager et récolta des tomates, des jromons, des carottes et des aubergines aussi lourdes que des seins de femmes. (77-78)

male genitalia” (Anghelescu 522), connects them in turn to the aubergines growing in the garden, which are “as heavy as women’s breasts”.

These elements contribute to creating a sense of abundance and bliss, which could explain the reference to Allah’s garden. Not only are the words paradise and garden etymologically related through old Persian (A. Cunningham 39), but religious texts are rich in garden-related imagery, such as the Garden of Eden in the Bible and the various representations of Paradise in the Quran. Thus, making a garden means creating a paradise on earth. If in the Christian tradition the Paradise is lost, in Islam dwelling in a garden is the reward for the faithful (41). Paradise in the Quran is indeed depicted as a fecund garden, where fruits are abundant and never out of season, where there is fresh water and plants provide extensive shadow (Khattab, Surah Al-Waqi’ah 56:27-33). As Amitav Ghosh observes, “plants, flowers, herbs, and trees recur again and again as objects of desire and admiration” in different religious traditions (Ghosh 91). However, such religious resonances are not simply assimilated, but also adjusted to the context. Commenting on postcolonial Caribbean literature’s “tendency to mimic the European Edenic paradigm”, Annie Rehill writes that the trope of a paradisiacal nature is reappropriated by local writers and transformed by the addition of “specifically Caribbean flavours” (135). The vegetables listed are, in fact, distinctive: tomatoes and aubergine grow well in sunny and warm conditions, and tomatoes are the second most cultivated vegetable in Guadeloupe (Agriste Guadeloupe 16). Jiromon, or giraumon, is the local name given to some varieties of cucurbitaceae, such as squash and pumpkin.

Besides being pleasing to the eye and providing food for sustenance, this variety of species also shows its own sort of agency in the story. Movar’s orchids and vegetables attract people from other villages, thus creating a web of entanglements and connections. However, if the garden draws attention for its beauty, it also makes some people suspicious as they start noticing the strangeness of Movar and Babakar’s situation, living together under the same roof, and surrounded by luxuriant greenery. Their relationship intrigues, shocks, and makes people whisper (Condé 148), to the point that they decide to move and to start looking for ReINETTE’s relatives in Haiti.

The Comeback of the Master of the Dew

The story moves back, as if with a circular motion, to Haiti. The reasons that lead both characters to leave Guadeloupe are various and, even though it cannot be claimed that the garden is either the sole or the foremost responsible, it can be certainly stated that it contributes to Movar’s feeling-at-homeness in the very place he had escaped from:

By contrast, Movar was in his element. He carried out the work he loved, becoming again a “Master of the dew”. He cleared out the surrounding lands and uncovered the gully of a ravine. Without any knowledge of civil engineering, he had built an irrigation system. The land started giving not only tomatoes, but also salad, aubergines, peppers, and all kinds of peas, because, as he stated with all seriousness: people do not really have something to eat unless they can make some sticky-pea rice.⁵

⁵ Movar, quant à lui, se retrouva dans son élément. Il accomplissait le travail qu’il aimait, redevenu un “Gouverneur de la rosée”. Il débroya les terres environnantes et fit surgir le cours enfouid’une ravine. Lui

There are two main observations that could be made about this passage, one on the gardener as “Gouverneur de la rosée”, and the other concerning instinct, or, the gut feeling that leads Movar to perform the right actions without any training in civil engineering. Starting from the latter, the question could be framed in terms of *ecological intimacy*: the gardener learns by doing, by observing, and by attuning to soil ecology. These actions foster deep and meaningful connections. Therefore, Movar’s kin-making is simultaneously a becoming-with, as he becomes attuned to the garden’s needs and to the best possible ways of sustaining life within its enclosed space. It could be defined as a new form of relationality which, in Glissant’s words, is not “the absolute ontological possession regarded as sacred but the complicity of relation” (147). Glissant uses this definition to explain a new relationship with the land, one born of experiences of misplacement and mistrust in plantation regimes. The violence encountered by the novel’s characters is not that of plantation regimes, but it is still rooted in a definite historical and geographical context, marked by the legacy of colonial land management. The experience of gardening adds to this form of connectedness, transforming it into an ecologically intimate experience. The intimacy is here emphasised through the use of Haitian Creole, which, for native Haitians, is the language of everyday use (Govain 8). Through the activities of seeding, tending, and transplanting, humans connect with soil and establish relations of care, which result, in Puig de la Bellacasa’s words, in ‘alterontologies’ opposed to technoscientific approaches only aimed at increasing productivity (692). Different views of time can be explored by simply “squinting at birds in the sky or digging below the surface” (Heine 2). Hence, the care-time that gardeners devote to soils is the basis for “creating liveable and lively worlds” (Puig de la Bellacasa 708), as there can be no innovation or growth without the acts of “everyday maintenance and repair” (708) that constitute the practice of gardening.

Naming Movar a Master of the Dew, Condé references one of the classics of Haitian literature, Jacques Roumain’s 1944 *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, translated into English by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook in 1947, with the title of *Masters of the Dew*. In 1975, Roumain’s novel was also turned into a movie by film director Maurice Failevic. *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* tells the story of Manuel, a young Haitian who, after years spent working on sugar plantations in Cuba, comes back to his native land to find its landscape altered by deforestation and dryness, and its inhabitants divided by a family feud. He sets to remedying to both by starting a peasant movement that he calls the Masters of the Dew. Thus, he becomes a sort of “ecological hero” and, by the end of the novel, also a martyr to the cause (Bonvalot). Together with Jacques Stephen Alexis’ *Les Arbres Musiciens* (1957), these two Haitian classics portray a landscape scarred by social conflicts and ecological degradation, where land misuse is exacerbated by local and international speculation. In this same landscape Movar, like Manuel, comes back as a Master of the Dew, bringing water where it was missing and restoring a patch of land.

qui n’avait aucune notion de génie civil, il avait réalisé un système d’irrigation. Désormais, la terre donnait outre des tomates, de la salade, des aubergines, des poivrons, toutes sortes de pois, car affirmait-il avec le plus grand sérieux: pa gen mon manjé, si pa gen diri ac pwa kolé. (202)

However, the title of master or governor calls forth additional images from the island's colonial past. Colonial governors were high-rank civil servants who represented the king of France or the English crown in colonies, and who exercised authority over the local population. This is not, however, the kind of relationship Movar seems to establish in the garden space: as previously highlighted, the garden shows its own agency and is one of the forces that guide him as the story unfolds. As Emanuele Coccia claims in his *Metamorphoses*, the world is a relational entity in which every species and every organism is "both garden and gardener of other species" (158). The Italian philosopher disputes the idea of planet Earth as a "planetary garden" we are collectively called to tend to and protect. The concept was introduced by garden theorist Gilles Clément who writes:

A terrifying revelation: the earth, understood as a territory reserved for life, is a closed space, limited by the limits of living systems (the biosphere). It is a garden. Once said, this statement obliges all human beings, as passengers on earth, to shoulder our responsibility to protect the living organisms whose steward we are. So we are gardeners. (Clément 135)

Clément's view of the Earth as a planetary garden and of humans as its gardeners strengthens the human vs. nature hierarchical dichotomy. In contrast to it, Coccia argues that humans are objects of gardening too, being one of the "cultural and agricultural products" (154) of plants. This interpretation of garden relationalities subverts the vertical and dichotomous structure that sees plants as lifeless and helpless receivers, and reinstates agency to the more-than-human world. Not only are plants sentient and communicative beings, but they can even manipulate other species, humans included. For instance, Head and Atchison talk about plant charisma, claiming that "in changing form, plants change their capacity to draw an affective response from humans" (237), and define the garden as a biogeography enabling "embodied encounters with plants" (240). Consequently, vegetal agencies play an important role in creating and defining both the garden and the gardener's attitude; Movar is a governor in that he shapes the space around him, but he is in turn shaped by it. Back in Haiti as a *homo gardinus* and a Master of the Dew, he looks at the barren landscape with no more fright, but wondering who is responsible for that, and how it can be remedied (Condé 264).

The attachment and connection that links Movar to the garden is, however, not enough to keep him grounded. Toward the end of the novel, seized by the necessity of rejoining Reinette, he contacts a psychic, who asks him for a large sum of money. His time and entire being become devoted to this pursuit, to the point that he starts neglecting the garden (Condé 260). In search of a job that could help him find the money he needs, he decides to try his luck in Labadee, a private resort where cruise ships full of foreign tourists stop. The area is fenced-off and the access restricted to authorised personnel only (Condé 261). In spite of his friends' warnings, Movar leaves the safety of his human and more-than-human community, with fatal consequences: he is robbed and kicked, and dies alone and unnoticed in the streets of a shanty town. This sudden and tragic ending might be seen as contradicting his path of personal growth and the struggle for finding rootedness, both of which he accomplished in connection with the vegetal world. However, as Kincaid claims in *My Garden (Book)*: "A gardener, any gardener, is not a stable being; that gardener, any gardener, is not a model of consistency" (224). Movar is no

model of stability and consistency and neither is his Jardin d'Allah a point of arrival: it is part of his story, a story in which blossoming, as in the vegetal world, is followed by decay and quiescence. With reference to the garden space, it seems to quietly fade into the background as Condé focuses on the last catastrophic events in Haiti. In spite of that, the series of cyclones and the final earthquake that close the novel do not necessarily signal the end of Movar's gardens. It could be possible to imagine seeds scattered by the strong winds, or other gardeners setting up their own Jardin d'Allah in the aftermath of the earthquake. As claimed by Wall Kimmerer, any relationship with and within the soil "becomes a seed itself" (127).

Conclusions: Unearthing Stories

In spite of the fact that *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* seems to be mostly preoccupied with human relations and entanglements, landscapes in the novel are more than mere backgrounds. Nature in both Guadeloupe and Haiti is represented as lively and as actively participating into the characters' lives. It manifests its agency in multiple ways, from the threat of rising waters recalled by the novel's title to the final earthquake, which shakes the very foundations of Haiti. By focusing on a specific example of engagement with the environment, the aim of this article was that of showing how ecological awareness and sensitivity might emerge from a close reading of texts. In this particular instance, the character of Movar has enabled reflections and considerations on how gardening might be an effective response to impoverished soils and precarious lifestyles.

Restoring soil ecologies does indeed impact the environment as a whole: as stated in the opening sentence of the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, "land, including its water bodies, provides the basis for human livelihoods and well-being" (79). In addition, "some land-related actions [...] contribute to climate change adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development" (18). The benefits thus concern both the biotic (of which humans are part) and abiotic community that forms in and around garden spaces. Being a *homo gardinus* in the Anthropocene means adapting one's perception of time to the timescapes of nature: growth requires quality time (the care time Puig De La Bellacasa talks about) and often happens imperceptibly, undetected by human eyes.

However, these timescapes become more complex in the Caribbean, where the contaminated histories of plants and animals need to be taken into account. Imperial biopolitics, soil exploitation, and unrestrained deforestation have impacted soil health and, compounded by the loss of indigenous practices, have resulted in impoverished landscapes. Through the character of Movar, Condé shows that literature can be both aesthetically pleasing and ecologically aware: by creating new stories, authors draw attention to local knowledge and to the germination of new forms of enmeshedness which blur dichotomies and boundaries between humans and more-than-humans. The "Jardin d'Allah" is both an idealised space and a grounded, material reality in the novel, whose agency is displayed on several levels. Apart from its most immediate effects on the wellbeing of the human characters, it also contributes to the circularity of Movar's story, which starts and ends in Haiti, passing through Guadeloupe. Even the last, abandoned

garden is not purposeless, because the flowers, vegetables, and herbs planted are the seeds that will germinate after the cyclones have hit the island. These same seeds have the power of circulating even farther, embedded as they are in a story, thus generating knowledge and “alterontologies”.

Hence, gardening in literature not only needs to be positioned within larger timeframes, but also within wider geographies. As highlighted at the beginning of this article, soils have characteristics that are place-specific and their development is influenced by a number of variables, such as the climate, elevation, and parent material. There are, however, some common patterns that have emerged during particular historical periods, such as land-clearing in colonies, or the use of chemical fertilisers during the Green Revolution. Practices of soil restoration thus need to be shared and discussed across geographies: organic farming, for instance, could positively affect “bio-physical and psycho-socio-economic balances at any space and time scale by enhancing natural elements and processes of the native environment” (Caporali 89). Gardening, since it involves small plots and is not (exclusively) production-oriented, has benefits in terms of environmental sustainability. As shown by Berkowitz and Medley’s study, gardenscapes contribute to land sustainability, to biodiversity, and to the wellbeing of the community that constitutes these spaces. The representation of such multi-species communities, made of encounters and of relations of emergence, is perhaps one of the most significant ways in which literature can appeal to our ecological sensibilities, and pave the way for more sustainable ways of co-dwelling on Earth.

Submission received 5 July 2022

Revised version accepted 21 February 2023

Works Cited

- Agreste Guadeloupe. *Mémento de la statistique agricole*. Antilles Imprimerie, 2020.
- Anghelescu, Nora Eugenia, et al. “A History of Orchids. A History of Discovery, Lust and Wealth.” *Scientific Papers-Series B-Horticulture*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2020, pp. 519-530, [doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.31997.38880](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31997.38880).
- Berkowitz, Briana N., and Kimberly E. Medley. “Home Gardenscapes as Sustainable Landscape Management on St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean.” *Sustainability*, vol. 9, no. 8, 2017, pp. 1-20, [doi:10.3390/su9081310](https://doi.org/10.3390/su9081310).
- Bonvalot, Anne-Laure. *Jacques Roumain – Gouverneurs de la Rosée*. Université Angers. Accessed 2 Jan. 2023.
- Bourg Hacker, Dominique. *Acts of Gardening: Imagining the Environment and Plotting Community in Contemporary Decolonial South Africa and Caribbean Fiction*. 2019. University of Wisconsin-Madison, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, no. 13901007.
- Brodwin, Paul. “Marginality and Subjectivity in the Haitian Diaspora.” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2003, pp. 383-410. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3318182.
- Caporali, Fabio. *Agriculture and Health: the Challenge of Organic Agriculture*. EDITEAM sas, 2004.

- Chao, Sophie. "(Un)Worlding the Plantationocene: Extraction, Extinction, Emergence." *eTropic*, special issue of *Tropical Landscapes: Nature~Culture Entanglements*, vol. 21, no.1, 2022, [doi:10.25120/etropic.21.1.2022.3838](https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.1.2022.3838).
- Chopin, Pierre, and Jorge Sierra. "Potential and Constraints for Applying the '4 per 1000 Initiative' in the Caribbean: the Case of Guadeloupe." *Regional Environmental Change*, vol. 21, no. 13, 2021, [doi:10.1007/s10113-020-01740-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-020-01740-4).
- Clément, Gilles. *"The Planetary Garden" and Other Writings*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.
- Coccia, Emanuele. *Metamorphoses*. Polity Press, 2021.
- Cunningham, Andrew. "The Culture of Gardens." *Cultures of Natural History*, edited by N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 38-56.
- Cunningham, Robert K. "The Effect of Clearing a Tropical Forest Soil." *Journal of Soil Science*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1963, pp. 334-345, [doi:10.1111/j.1365-2389.1963.tb00957.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2389.1963.tb00957.x).
- Dash, Jean Michael. *The Disappearing Island: Haiti, History, and the Hemisphere*. CERLAC Colloquia Paper, 2004.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. "Yam, Roots, and Rot: Allegories of the Provision Grounds." *Small Axe*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 58-75, [doi:10.1215/07990537-1189530](https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-1189530).
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M., et al. Introduction. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, edited by E. M. DeLoughrey et al., University of Virginia Press, 2005, pp. 1-30.
- Diogo, Maria Paula, et al. "Nature and Gardens in the History of Science and Technology and in Garden and Landscape Studies." Introduction. *Gardens and Human Agency in the Anthropocene*, edited by M. P. Diogo et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 1-16.
- Don Roger, Hoy. *Agricultural Land Use of Guadeloupe*. 1960. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, no. 6100147.
- Ferdinand, Malcom. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Translated by Anthony Paul Smith, Polity Press, 2022.
- Gardi, Ciro, et al. *Soil Atlas of Latin America and the Caribbean*. European Commission - Publications Office of the European Union, 2015.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg's Curse*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Giam, Xingli. "Global biodiversity loss from tropical deforestation." *PNAS*, vol. 114, no. 23, 2017, pp. 5775-5777, [doi:10.1073/pnas.1706264114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1706264114)
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Govain, Renauld. "La question linguistique haïtienne: histoire, usages et description." *Hal Open Science*, 2022.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Head, Lesley, and Jennifer Atchison. "Cultural Ecology: Emerging Human-Plant Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 236-245.
- Heine, Zoe. *Cultivating Care: Exploring the Patchy Anthropocene in Four Community Gardens in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand*. 2020. Victoria University of Wellington, MA thesis, [doi:10.26686/wgtn.17145893.v1](https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.17145893.v1).

- Hylkema, Amy L. "Haiti Soil Fertility Analysis and Crop Interpretations for Principal Crops in the Five Winner Watershed Zones of Intervention." 2011. University of Florida, MA thesis.
- IUSS Working Group WRB. *World Reference Base for Soil Resources 2014, update 2015: International Soil Classification System for Naming Soils and Creating Legends for Soil Maps*. FAO, 2015.
- IPCC. *Climate Change and Land: an IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems*. 2019. <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>.
- Khattab, Mustafa, translator. *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation*. E-book ed., www.theclearquran.com, 2015.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (Book)*. Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1999.
- Knepper, Wendy. "'How does your garden grow?' or Jamaica Kincaid's spatial praxis in My Garden (Book): and Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya." *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, edited by A. Teverson and S. Upstone, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 40-56.
- Lund, Christian. "Gardening is a Kind of Colonialism | Writer Jamaica Kincaid | Louisiana Channel." *YouTube*, uploaded by Louisiana Channel, 28 Apr. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWFgUAU2gbE>.
- Munley, Ellen. "De la Parole-racine à la Parole-rhizome: La Voix de la Nature comme Guide chez Maryse Condé." *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2018, pp. 178-192, [doi:10.1353/nef.2018.0012](https://doi.org/10.1353/nef.2018.0012).
- Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. "Making Time for Soil: Technoscientific Futurity and the Pace of Care." *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 45, no. 5, 2015, pp. 691-716.
- Rahbi, Pierre. *Manifesto per la Terra e per l'Uomo*. Translated by Alessandra Maestrini, Kindle ed., Add Editore, 2011.
- Rodrigues, Ana Duarte. "From Pairidaeza to Planet Garden: the Homo-Gardinus against Desertification." *Gardens and Human Agency in the Anthropocene*, edited by M. P. Diogo et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 95- 111.
- Roumain, Jacques. *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*. 1944. Kindle ed., Orphie, 2015.
- Sierra, Jorge, et al. "Observed and Predicted Changes in Soil Carbon Stocks under Export and Diversified Agriculture in the Caribbean. The case study of Guadeloupe." *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, vol. 213, 2015, pp. 252-264, [doi:10.1016/j.agee.2015.08.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2015.08.015).
- Singh, Amritpal, and Sanjiv Duggal. "Medicinal Orchids - An Overview." *Ethnobotanical Leaflets*, vol. 13, 2009, pp. 399-412.
- Tomich, Dale. "Une Petite Guinée: Provision Ground and Plantation in Martinique, 1830-1848." *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1991, pp. 68-91, [doi: 10.1080/01440399108575023](https://doi.org/10.1080/01440399108575023).
- Wall Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Penguins, 2013.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation." *Savacou*, no. 5, 1971, pp. 95-102.

"I am not by any stretch a gardener, just curious": Feminist Gentrifier Memoirs and an Ethics of Urban Gardening

Maria Sulimma
University of Freiburg, Germany
Maria.sulimma@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4876>



Abstract

Even though the texts that this article refers to as "feminist gentrifier memoirs" are not exclusively examples of garden writing, their feminist writers' gardening practices feature prominently to explore their conflicted position in a gentrifying neighborhood and the networks of care that form out of neighborly interactions over the garden. These texts employ modes and affordances of garden writing, feminist memoir, urban memoir, and gentrification fiction. Drawing on urban studies, literary studies, and environmental humanities, the article turns to Anne Elizabeth Moore's *Gentrifier* (2021) and Vikki Warner's *Tenemental* (2018) as engagements with the complex emotions caused by their writers' white privilege, homeownership, and complicity in processes of displacement and real estate speculation. Which ethical consequences do these feminist writers draw from their benefiting from and contribution to the gentrification of their cities? And how does their gardening allow them to develop a feminist ethics of urban gardening in this specific context? The article further considers the ways these writers are influenced by the activism of community gardening and how their gardening relates to sustainability measures of cities, including urban farms and gardens (summarized under the keywords green or environmental gentrification).

Keywords: Urban gardening, environmental gentrification, memoir, feminism, gentrifier.

Resumen

Aunque los textos a los que este artículo se refiere como "memorias feministas de gentrificadoras" no son ejemplos exclusivos de escritura sobre jardines, las prácticas de jardinería de sus escritoras feministas ocupan un lugar destacado para explorar su posición conflictiva en un barrio gentrificado y las redes de cuidado que se forman a partir de las interacciones vecinales en torno al jardín. Basándose en los estudios urbanos de las ciencias sociales y las humanidades, los estudios literarios y las humanidades ambientales, el artículo se centra en *Gentrifier* (2021) de Anne Elizabeth Moore y *Tenemental* (2018) de Vikki Warner como tomas de posición respecto de las complejas emociones causadas por el privilegio blanco de sus escritoras, la propiedad de la vivienda y la complicidad en los procesos de desplazamiento y especulación inmobiliaria. Estos textos emplean modos y posibilidades de la escritura de jardines, las memorias feministas, las memorias urbanas y la ficción de la gentrificación. El artículo considera además las formas en que están influenciados por el activismo de la jardinería comunitaria y se benefician de las medidas de sostenibilidad de las ciudades, incluyendo las granjas y jardines urbanos (resumidos bajo las palabras clave gentrificación verde o ambiental).

Palabras clave: Jardinería urbana, gentrificación medioambiental, memorias, feminismo, gentrificadora.

This contribution looks at two US-American examples of feminist life writing that position gardening within larger narratives of urban change: Anne Elizabeth Moore's *Gentrifier* (2021) and Vikki Warner's *Tenemental: Adventures of A Reluctant Landlady*

(2018). These autobiographical texts by feminist writers and activists critically explore a rather neglected yet fundamental position invested with economic privilege and complicity: the gentrifier. And yet these gentrifier writers are also gardeners, and write about their gardens as a site of encounter with their neighbors. They are aware of clichéd metaphoric relations between gardening and writing, and hence, attempt to reconcile the pleasures of a privately-owned garden with cultural contexts of environmental justice and green gentrification. Warner and Moore unexpectedly find themselves in possession of real estate and struggle with the ethical, financial, and organizational difficulties that this ownership (and, in Warner's case, the renting out of living space to others) entails.

Since sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term in 1964, academia and activism have struggled to define "gentrification." It commonly refers to multifaceted, systematic urban processes of neoliberal capitalist privatization, globalization, and the destruction of a city's affordable housing stock. At the heart of the phenomenon is thus a class conflict, that is racialized because communities of color are disproportionately affected. Recently, scholarship has been trying to find ways to explore how gentrification simultaneously describes "the interaction between the social institutions around us and the choices we make" (Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 14). The feminist gentrifier memoirs discussed in this article share this interest with such critical scholarship.

Gentrifier is Eisner Award-winning culture critic and graphic artist Anne Elizabeth Moore's tenth book, following *Sweet Little Cunt: The Graphic Work of Julie Doucet* (2019) and *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes* (2017). In 2016, Moore was awarded a permanent writing residency in the form of a renovated "free" house in Detroit through the now-defunct nonprofit *Write a House*.¹ The goal of this writer's program was to "fundamentally shift the narrative about Detroit by bestowing gifts upon the exact folks who craft narratives for a living" (Moore 13/4), not unlike the Detroit mayor's office which had hired an official storyteller as part of the city government in the same year (Borosch). Moore moved to Detroit's Bengali Muslim neighborhood Banglatown, and to a large extent the memoir is about the community she finds with her neighbors.

Pushcart Prize-nominated writer Vikki Warner's debut book *Tenemental* follows the decade or so since Warner, in her mid-twenties, impulsively decided to take out a mortgage to buy a crumbling three-story house in the Federal Hill neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. Like Moore's memoir, the narrative amounts to a kind of Bildungsroman with the house as a touchstone for Warner coming to terms with being a homeowner, landlady, and unwilling participant in systems of wealth accumulation and real estate speculation. She explains that "it is my home, not my profession" (213). Again and again, her gender identity and age result in cismale contractors, realtors, or tenants not taking Warner seriously, and the different strategies she develops to manage challenging situations by herself.

Both memoirs are critical of the practices with which these women inhabit and improve their new homes, including gardening. They seek to avoid cultural narratives of

¹ Moore was the third writer to be awarded, following poet Casey Rocheteau and journalist Liana Aghajanian, both of whom still live in their houses in Detroit. The nonprofit was financially unable to award a house to the fourth winner, local poet Nandi Comer, and has since dissolved the program (Derringer).

home renovation as a transformative process of generating real estate value, well known from reality television shows like *Fixer Upper* (HGTV, 2013-2018) or *Flip or Flop* (HGTV, 2013-2022). Robert Goldman argues such shows celebrate "home renovation and flipping as gentrification opportunities—as a symbolic revitalization of spaces that allows ordinary people to make money, build financial security, and optimize their living conditions" (9).² Both writers are well aware that their unexpected homeownership plays into the US-American fantasy of property ownership as a means of social mobility. At the same time, their books interrogate the need for (economic) stability as single women without job security and struggling with chronic health issues.

Further, these texts can be called feminist gentrifier memoirs because they come to terms with the writer's impact on a changing, often postindustrial urban neighborhood and their diverging from their neighbors in terms of class status, race, and education. Against this background, the garden emerges as a particular site of place-making. In and through the garden, the feminist writers connect with their immigrant neighbors across language barriers and cultural differences. These feminist gardeners may on the surface show commonalities with the white, urban, middle-class, millennial "hipster farmer" that, as Katje Armentrout argues, appropriates "characteristics of traditional family farmers and commodif[ies] their lifestyle" (86). And yet, as their critical engagements with the label of gentrifier demonstrate, the writers of such gentrifier memoirs are well aware of their privileged gardening practices.

This article will focus on Moore's and Warner's respective memoirs precisely because their books are not traditional examples of garden literature but, instead, feminist reflections on complicity, privilege, and the complex affects of life in a gentrifying city—a context in which gardening becomes a vehicle for understanding and expressing emotions beyond mere proclamations of guilt. An example of a feminist garden memoir is Susan Brownmiller's *My City Highrise Garden* (2017) about the writer's terrace garden in a rent-stabilized apartment in New York City. Brownmiller recapitulates how fortunate she is to have a "private oasis in a competitive city" (6), even though the "hostile, unnatural environment" (4) twenty flights above street level brings with it gardening challenges such as extreme wind and temperatures. Throughout this article, Brownmiller's more traditional garden memoir, albeit written by a prominent feminist, serves as a point of comparison with Moore and Warner's texts.

This article aims to explore the role of gardening in these feminist memoirs of gentrification, and in the following two sections, to relate them to the conventions of garden writing as well as to social science scholarship on green gentrification. While the first section is interested in the question of what a feminist gardener is, the second section explores this persona's relationship to larger, structural issues of gentrification by asking what the feminist gentrifier/gardener can contribute to current discussions about urban change. The ambiguous subject position of gentrifier is thus connected with the much

² Warner articulates a similar criticism, demonstrating her awareness of this discourse: "We did have that pretty bad crisis about a decade ago, and that kind of felt like a rock-bottom moment, but here we are again, so soon. Americans are so enamored of housing as a way to get rich and look rich, though, that we cannot stay away" (222).

more socioculturally attractive position of the gardener, and, through the perspective of the feminist writer and activist, this uneasy combination is interrogated in its complexity. These types of texts are indebted to various literary traditions and genres, such as urban memoirs, feminist life writing,³ and autobiographical garden writing. Next, I will briefly summarize these three different literary traditions and the feminist gentrifier memoir's indebtedness to them.

1) Katzenberg and Freitag describe how autobiographical writing set in cities or urban regions positions an individual urban dweller's experience as relating to the city as a whole as an "urban memoirist script": "city memoirists' self-narration may be understood as always both predefined by preexisting urban societal models and intervening in them. They are generated in a process of being inscribed, writing one's self, and redefining one's self via one's city" (n.p.). Katzenberg and Freitag draw on Danielewicz's argument for the simultaneously "referential (the author is a real person) and relational (the author's relationships to others are central)" characteristics of memoir (6) to capture the tension between the individual writer and larger city populations.

2) Western feminist movements have a unique relationship to memoirs, as evident in the memorable slogan the personal is political, the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, or movement autobiographies by celebrity feminists such as Susan Brownmiller (*In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, 1999), Betty Friedan (*Life So Far: A Memoir*, 2000), or Andrea Dworkin (*Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant*, 2002). Kaye Mitchell employs the term "feminist writings from life" to account for such writing that shares an anxiety about the relation of the self to the collective experience of the movement (208). Mitchell urges us to ask if such texts "reduce political, structural, and public issues to personal struggles, or whether they use personal struggle as a lens for confronting and combatting those structural injustices with which feminism has always concerned itself?" (209). Further, Kyla Schuller demonstrates that despite the historical diversity of feminist movements in the US, it is a particular kind of feminism that has been dominant: "white feminism attracts people of all sexes, races, sexualities, and class backgrounds, though straight, white, middle-class women have been its primary architects" (3). And since its beginnings, white feminism has been intricately connected to private property ownership: "White feminism began in the 1840s with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others' fight for white women to possess the rights and privileges afforded to white men, including the right to own property and to hold careers" (221). Moore and Warner are well aware of their racial privilege. The question of how to be a feminist and a white woman, and yet not profit from the affordances of white feminism, lies at the heart of the feminist gentrifier memoir.

3) Within a US-American literary context from the 19th century to the present, Jennifer Wren Atkinson distinguishes gardening literature, "anything from instructional guides, seed catalogs, and reference books to glossy coffee-table publications," from garden writing, a genre that employs "a relatively stylized or 'literary' mode where the

³ The article employs the term feminism in a broader sense, yet, the concerns and approaches of academic and activist ecofeminists also apply. However, both authors use the term feminist rather than ecofeminist and do not engage with the history of ecofeminism.

writer's personal reflections and voice" are crucial (3). In addition, Robert S. Emmett further expresses the necessity to look at "the literature of gardening—not as an isolated analysis of genre but within the political and environmental contexts in which gardens and garden literature were created" (2). Both literary scholars highlight the special status of autobiographical writing within the literary mode and literary history of garden writing, especially that by women of color such as Alice Walker or Jamaica Kincaid.

Against this literary and cultural background, Moore and Warner's autobiographical writing develops a kind of gentrifier memoir subgenre and thus responds to urban scholars and activists' call to establish responsibility and awareness of how oneself contributes to processes of gentrification. As urban sociologists John Schlichtman, Jason Patch, and Marc Lamont Hill argue in their auto-ethnographical study *Gentrifier* (2017): "we believe that the most difficult work in understanding gentrification is not putting ourselves in the place of the 'victims' but honestly putting ourselves in our own place" (Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 5). The garden then becomes a particular site within which to explore these interactions between the individual and the larger systems within which they exist. This turn to the garden is nothing new because the garden has long been used as a representation of or lens through which to understand societal issues and politics.

Garden Politics, Feminist Gardeners, and their Neighbors

In *My Highrise Garden*, Brownmiller recalls the events of September 11, 2001, and then sarcastically apologizes: "Sorry to have gone on about 9/11 in a garden book, but I could not suppress what I witnessed that day from my penthouse aerie near the Hudson River" (31). The apology is insincere because the writer is well aware that a garden book set on a NYC terrace would have to include some acknowledgment of this tragic moment in the city's history. And yet, Brownmiller's comment is not out of place either. After all, gardening has long been understood as an "apolitical and disengaged" activity (Atkinson 217)—despite the best efforts of radical progressive gardeners (see McKay). However, the political resistance of radical gardeners against the destruction of their community gardens and the selling of the land to real-estate developers continues to serve as a powerful model for anti-gentrification activism. Further, the work of postcolonial garden writers or garden writers of color offers a similar exploration of the politics of gardening as enmeshed in larger systems of exploitation and injustice. For instance, Antonia Purk argues that Jamaica Kincaid "implicates herself in processes of globalization that are grounded in the very colonizing practices she criticizes, but in doing so, she also exhibits an awareness for her participation in such relationships" (359). While the Antiguan-American writer, who grew up with the legacies of colonialism and racism, is differently positioned than the white woman coming to terms with her privileged homeownership, their writing about the garden still has to navigate the tensions of complicity, criticism, and pleasure caused by their horticultural practice.

In what follows, I want to tease out the affordances and limitations of the subject position from which Moore and Warner write simultaneously as gardeners, gentrifiers,

writers, and feminists. I am interested in how the feminist memoir imagines the feminist gardener as a storyteller position from which to depict the difficult position of complicity in gentrification and the conflicting emotions related to the status as gentrifier.

Emmett finds that "autobiographical garden writing is a form well-suited to reproducing the interpenetration of selfhood and property" (84), precisely because installing a garden, taking care of it, or paying someone to do so validates ownership (15-16). However, Moore and Warner's gardening appears less to establish home ownership than to become involved with others. Their gardens are unstable spaces that allow for the encounter with neighbors. Interestingly, neither Moore nor Warner falls back on a trope of garden writing, the tour of the garden (or terrace in Brownmiller's case). This trope gives readers the lay of the land, with the narrative voice taking on the persona of a guide and proud owner showing off their possessions. Rather than such a tour, the gentrifier memoir offers only glimpses and vignettes of the garden, refusing to establish the garden as a fixed space and highlighting its fluctuation and porousness in this textual form, as well as deemphasizing the women's ownership.

Both writers begin gardening when they come into possession of their house without prior knowledge of, or experience with gardening. Curiously, neither woman recalls childhood memories or family traditions connected to gardening. After all, the nostalgic return to the gardening practices of parents or grandparents, or planting of plants remembered from childhood gardens, is yet another staple of garden writing.⁴ Directly after moving into her new home, Moore plants bean seeds, without commenting on how these seeds came into her possession. "I am not by any stretch a gardener, just curious, so before I open a single box, I carefully drop the beans into the dirt in my front yard at evenly spaced intervals and, with a paper cup, water them in. Ten days later, tiny bean plants poke through the dirt" (27). This passage is striking because planting as a means of settling into a new home is such an established practice: "throughout American history, immigrants have carried seeds to new homes both to preserve material links to places left behind and establish a sense of belonging in new homes" (Atkinson 174). Recalling Henry David Thoreau's bean fields in *Walden* (1854), Moore's gardening is an experiment, and she appears surprised at its success. Like Thoreau facing the scrutiny of other farmers for not sticking to seasonal schedules and experimenting with farming procedures, Moore's choice to plant vegetables in her front yard puzzles other gardeners. Neighbors "side-eyed me then and asked why I didn't want pretty flowers in front of my new, pretty house" (51). Nevertheless, the same neighbors decide to share her enthusiasm, enjoy the beans she gifts them, and bring her Lima bean seeds from Bangladesh to plant next to her Kentucky beans—all of which becomes an apt metaphor for intercultural exchange and shared living.

Whereas for Moore moving into her new home begins with planting, Warner's garden suddenly occurs to her as an afterthought after months spent renovating the

⁴ For example, Brownmiller grows a birch tree because her father had birch trees (13), her honeysuckle reminds her of the street she grew up on in Brooklyn (121), and her peonies bring back "a crucial passage during my preteen years" (85).

house. "I remembered with dread and excitement that I was also responsible for resurrecting a scrubby, trash-plastered dirt lot that I hoped someone might someday call a backyard" (93). Warner accepts the challenge and already pictures herself "in a chaise lounge under a thick canopy of glossy leaves, the scent of geraniums infusing the Tom Collins in my hand" (95). While this initial vision is one of leisure and relaxation, Warner-like Moore- comes to enjoy the physicality of gardening itself. "I'd had no inkling of how hard I would fall for the seemingly repetitive and menial tasks required of the job" (97).

Both Moore and Warner struggle with chronic physical conditions. While Warner does not comment on how gardening affects her health, Moore—who has written about her autoimmune disease in *Body Horror* (2017)—does so. She realizes that repeated digging in the soil relieves her joint pain and that a diet of vegetables grown in her garden improves her health significantly:

I begin eating what I grow, first as seasoning, then side dishes, soon entire meals, and eventually I can go for whole seasons without shopping at grocery stores. My body adapts. Certain damaging medications, I find, I can take less of, with no noticeable increase in pain. My blood pressures steadies, then drops. For entire months, it is almost as if I am not sick at all, a new person in a new body. (121/122)

Here, Detroit-based Moore follows (but does not acknowledge) a well-established practice of black female Detroiters growing their own food to improve their health in an urban environment referred to as a "food desert" without access to fresh produce. Monica M. White demonstrates that African American women take up farming to "work toward food security and to obtain more control of the food system that affects their daily lives" (18). Interestingly, Moore's writing also draws parallels between her digestive system and that of her garden, the compost. These descriptions link the writer's body with that of her garden in ways that exceed the sensual and aesthetic pleasures so often proclaimed in the physical exertion of gardening or eating one's produce. Rather, for Moore, keeping her garden healthy becomes a means to keeping her body healthy.

Overall, gardening is a rich source of political metaphors, images, and meanings (including, as Tim Cresswell demonstrates, metaphors surrounding weeds, health, disease, and bodily processes). These garden images have become so commonplace in political discourse that some worry about their becoming "dead metaphors, as figures of speech that reinforce the status quo—in other words, the danger of cultivation as ideology" (Emmett 80). Moore runs up against this issue when she contemplates how to write about the difficulty of getting rid of the mulberry bushes in her backyard:

most of the metaphors available to describe similarly frustrating endeavors are literal descriptions of removing stumps – digging deep, growing like a weed, pulling something out by the root, feeling stumped. Because the practice I am engaged in daily is so widely understood to be filled with frustration that descriptions of it act as metaphors for other, less taxing undertakings, I do not write about it. (68/69)

Moore's hesitancy to express her gardening in worn-out, clichéd images reveals the challenge but also the appeal of gardening for the political writer. Famously, George Orwell was shamed by angry readers for his essays on the seemingly trivial pleasures of keeping a rose garden (Atkinson 217, Solnit 92). However, Rebecca Solnit, another feminist critic, takes Orwell's love of gardening as a starting point to investigate how the

activity of political writing may actually spark the desire for gardening. Solnit finds that gardening "offers the opposite of the disembodied uncertainties of writing. It's vivid to all the senses, it's a space of bodily labor, of getting dirty in the best and most literal way, an opportunity to see immediate and unarguable effect" (44). This immediacy of gardening appeals to writers Moore and Warner as well because it counters more abstract notions of white privilege and complicity in gentrification with moments of direct exchange with neighbors.

Both memoirs describe neighborly interactions over gardening as instances of improvised care, that are not always communicable across cultures and language barriers. For Warner and her Italian American neighbors, and Moore and her Bengali neighbors, working in the garden offers a context for encounter and a topic of conversation.

In one passage, after returning home, Moore finds several carpets lain on her soil by the older woman next door—to suppress the growth of weeds. This act of neighborly care is unasked for and cannot be explained because "the only English word she ever speaks is my nickname, Annie, and she says it now from her porch while flashing me a thumbs-up" (34). The humor derives from Moore's neighbor teaching the younger woman her gardening knowledge in disregard of US-American notions of private property and propriety. By contrast, Moore too causes surprise when she shares her gardening practices in the form of cow manure as fertilizer: "I ask my neighbors if they want any poop, and I am treated with disdain, as if I am a disgusting person. After the Year of the Many Baromasi Pumpkins, however, everyone wants some poop" (47).

Warner and her older, traditional Italian American neighbors, Angelo and Fiorella, follow a shared seasonal routine simultaneously enacted in both gardens. Hence Warner uses the collective pronoun "we" to describe their spring-time work: "we break off hardened stalks from the perennials scattered throughout our beds [...] We patch our hoses and scatter our compost" (27). Like Moore, Warner and her neighbors share advice on gardening and produce:

I gave him jars of the jam that I made every year from his grapes. And he handed me fat glowing tomatoes over the fence and pushed basil seedlings on me whether I had room in the garden or not. I passed them baskets of strawberries, and they tossed me escarole and arugula. (100)

Unlike the humorous trespassing of Moore's neighbors who enter her backyard without asking,⁵ Warner's backyard is fenced in and her encounters take place over their fence. This creates a shared secret community: "No one passing by would have known we were here, side by side, tucked behind our defeated, old houses, on green and flowering concrete plots" (100). Like Moore, Warner and her neighbors communicate across a language barrier. She begins to understand Angelo's mumbled Italian phrases within the context of their gardening; "soon enough I was able to respond with something more apropos than a nervous laugh or a blank nod" (99).

⁵ Moore describes how male neighbors wander into her backyard to watch her work as a form of entertainment. When she confronts the men, her neighbor explains, "we have just never seen a white woman work so hard" (43), again emphasizing her exceptional position in the majority Bengali neighborhood.

Brownmiller also highlights moments of neighborly exchange over gardening. Most memorably, she recalls a neighbor who had died from AIDS through a small memorial: "my first daylily [...] is housed in a magnificent brown-glazed urn that a neighbor in the building gave me when he knew he was dying of AIDS. His name was Rodgers" (80-1). Brownmiller faces a dilemma – not resolved in the book – when the lily does poorly and she wonders whether to replace the special plant growing in this meaningful container. Warner finds out about Angelo's death when she gardens alone without her activities being mirrored in the adjacent garden. To mourn, Warner decides (just like Brownmiller does with Rodger's urn) to create a garden remembrance: "I dedicate my garden that summer to his memory. I decide that every time I get tired of pulling weeds or stringing up trellises, I'll keep going a little longer, with him in mind" (219). This memorial gardening, or mourning through gardening, allows Warner and Brownmiller to move from considering death to appreciating life in ways resembling gardening cycles through different seasons.

From such descriptions of neighborly investments and care, the question arises whether these memoirs also, at times, fetishize the racialized neighbors. While the dominant perspective is that of the white US-American narrator, the humor over cross-cultural encounters is not necessarily only placed on the immigrant neighbors ignorant of US-American conventions of neighborly exchange but also on the neighborhood newcomer unaware of local history. Atkinson finds that gardening enables immigrant gardeners "to resist assimilation by preserving elements of their cultural heritage and identity, while simultaneously helping these immigrants establish a meaningful sense of belonging in unfamiliar new places" (172). Through Moore and Warner encountering their neighbor's garden practices and sharing their own experiences, a shared sense of neighborly belonging is established in their demographically divergent neighborhoods. It also enables the white feminist writer to work through conflicting emotions related to their status as gentrifiers, as the next section will explore further.

Again, the garden's particular spatial character is connected to but separate from the houses that the women now own, and that bring with them both ethical and concrete practical challenges. While their gardens also create issues, these are less morally fraught and treated more humorously. Further, in the garden, the women appear to cut themselves more slack when asking others for help and possessing inadequate knowledge or skills. For Warner, "being a woman and a feminist, and inhabiting the somewhat unusual role of landlady, I imagine that I always need to be capable and get things done without anyone's assistance" (141). Eventually, she learns to ask for help in the garden more willingly than for support with her responsibilities as the owner of a house.

Robert Emmett wonders:

What is it about gardens that challenges assumptions of private selves and private spaces and renders ethical questions more coherent and their political stakes more glaring? Perhaps it is their liminal character, the way even private gardens always border on public space, crossing the two categories. (83)

Indeed, especially for Moore, whose neighbors walk into her garden, and to a lesser extent for Warner's fenced-in backyard garden, garden practices blur the binary of public and

private spaces. These shifts follow the tradition of urban community gardens as pushing against notions of private property ownership and commodified urban space, leading gardeners to question such notions altogether (see Emmett 143, Haefs).

As Moore and Warner envision it, the feminist gardener embraces her own shortcomings and failures. She is critical of property ownership and aware of her privileged gardening practices. Because of this, her open garden is the site of surprising and sometimes unwelcome encounters with her neighbors. This hesitancy toward privileged real-estate and garden ownership also surfaces in these writers' avoidance of tropes of garden writing. Finally, as a transition to the next section, we need to ask what these practices of communal exchange in the garden mean within the context of gentrification. How do the individual garden politics of these writers relate to the larger societal contexts from which they are writing? Specifically, how are gentrification and activist resistance against it (such as by radical gardeners and community garden collectives) depicted in these texts?

Green Gentrification and the Conflicting Affects of Urban Gardening

Unlike garden writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, for whom gardening often took place in rural or suburban environments and was an escape from the city, contemporary writers are well aware of urban gardening as a means of reshaping urban spaces and challenging binaries of rural and urban (Atkinson 158). Such binaries may also affect perceptions of some cities as culturally and economically more important than others, the distinction between major and minor, or "secondary" cities (Finch, Ameel, and Salmela). Moore, for instance, is asked by a bank teller if living in Detroit after Chicago is like living on a farm: "She means this as a metaphor, as if I have moved from the big city to some quiet rural habitat" (51).

Moore utilizes this question to plunge into a list of gardening activities she has been up to—which the teller did not have in mind. Asking the reader to join in on it, her joke operates on said binary between rural and urban (or primary and secondary cities), as well as the ambiguous position of the urban gardener. However, this list does not reference urban farming practices in Detroit, particularly by women of color. While the reader learns that Moore volunteers at a majority African American urban farm, the memoir excludes any mention of concrete farming experiences, communal gardening, or knowledge exchanges from this farm. This is striking since these black female farmers employ gardening as "a strategy of resistance against capitalism, corporatism of the food system, and agribusiness" (White 24) in ways that are very compatible with anti-gentrification activism. Even if Moore had not been actively involved in such a collective, the omission of these African American urban gardening and farming practices would have been glaring. Specifically due to their relevance for the city of Detroit and Detroiters, these gardening practices are examples of the kind of community-building envisioned by feminist movements.

Following this example, two conceptions are relevant to understanding the connections between gentrification and urban gardening: gardening as an improvement

of a neighborhood, and thus, as enhancing a dynamic of green gentrification; and gardening as creating possibilities for community encounters and activist collectives against gentrification.

The terms "green gentrification" or "environmental gentrification" refer to urban sustainability efforts that appear to benefit a city population as a whole but, at a closer look, raise property values and accelerate the displacement of vulnerable demographics. "Low-income residents, homeless residents, tenants in informal housing, and people of color have found themselves excluded from the benefits of these new environmental amenities" (Pearsall 329). Green gentrification may include mobility (expanding bike infrastructure and public transportation, reducing car use), removal of pollution, brownfield redevelopment, and creation of green spaces. Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill point to the contradictions surrounding such urban changes: "farmers markets and urban farming, for instance, are seen as answers to food deserts for many progressives ... until they bring in those middle-class folks also looking for good food" (24-5). Wolch, Byrne, and Newell refer to this unintentional effect of gentrification that results from efforts to implement the principles of sustainability in city environments as "the urban green paradox" (235). The paradoxical discourse surrounding green gentrification is prone to become even more relevant as global warming accelerates and cities worldwide respond to the challenges of changing climates through sustainability campaigns.

However, stemming from the critical anti-gentrification activism of community gardens, gardening is explicitly often also understood as a method to achieve environmental justice (see Haefs). Sharon Zukin demonstrates the changes to the positively connotated "authenticity" of urban gardens shifting

from being a grassroots social movement challenging the state to an embodiment of ethnic identity, then an expression of secular cultural identity in tune with gentrifier's values, and finally a form of urban food production consistent with the tastes of middle-class locavores and strategies for sustainable development. (197)

Hamilton and Curran analyze sustainable planning efforts that attempt redevelopment without displacement. Central to such actions are strategic activist coalitions that involve newcomers to a neighborhood alongside residents to ensure that the interests of longtime residents are the priority of urban change. Such "gentrifier-enhanced environmental activism" (Hamilton and Curran 1558) could develop out of the improvised neighborly gardening networks that Moore and Warner describe—even though neither author is involved in activist coalitions in their neighborhood.

The death of her neighbor and fellow gardener, Angelo, gives Warner an occasion to think about the many ways their neighborhood has changed in Angelo's lifetime, including changes to the housing market. However, her considerations extend beyond merely wondering what Angelo would think about these transformations to positioning Angelo's death as a kind of signpost for them: "Angelo was my anchor to the old neighborhood; I understood it in some measure only because I could look at him, hear him speak. With his death, I had some kind of internal proof that the old institutions of this place were ending" (227). This description makes Warner sound like a "curator-gentrifier" mourning the loss of 'authentic' local life in her neighborhood (see

Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 163-171). Nevertheless, Angelo is not displaced from the neighborhood by rising rents but dies of old age in his home. Angelo's departure is thus fundamentally different from that of other neighbors who are priced out and who do not receive such a sentimental remembrance.

Increasingly, Moore comes to question the nonprofit organization that awarded her the house and their story that this house had been abandoned for years. Finally, she finds out about the foreclosure of her house based on inflated property assessments, a process that Detroit has been notorious for, which led to the previous owner being displaced by what she feels are "illegal and certainly unethical methods" (233). Her memoir depicts her attempts to find the previous owner and understand her complicity in their displacement. Strikingly, Moore comments on her stylistic choices in an interview:

I could have written this like a ghost story, wherein I would let the presence of the former owner linger but remain ephemeral [... instead] I presented it as a mystery, an investigation. Because the former owner of my house is still alive. Reparations are still possible. The housing crisis, too, is solvable. (Lindsay)

Within what is sometimes called gentrification fiction, ghosts frequently haunt white gentrifier characters (see Peacock).⁶ By contrast, Moore's response is more concerned with her bodily reaction than any supernatural presence. While reading the legal files, Moore feels "disembodiment kicks in then, the tethered distancing. It is not physical pain that unmoors me, but something more like psychic distress at the ease with which I participated in a fundamentally violent process" that is gentrification (219). This sense of disembodiment and distance describes a directly opposite experience from Moore's physically grounded gardening, her direct encounters with the garden and her neighbors.

Her realization ultimately leads to Moore leaving her neighborhood rather than – like Warner – staying and continuing to feel complicit. When Moore prepares to sell her house, she wonders whether to price it so her neighbors can afford it or that the money she invested is returned: "this is when I must decide if I will deliberately participate in the gentrification of Banglatown or write off several years of my life as a financial disaster filled with a lot of dark days. This is not an easy decision" (241). Moore decides to sell her house to a Bengali couple below market value. However, she has written her successful memoir based on "these dark days." In an interview, Moore expresses that the title of the book, *Gentrifier*, is an initial joke, a reduction of complexity undertaken by those "who never spent time in Detroit, have no idea what it was about or didn't understand my neighborhood at all and just automatically assumed that like, a white girl moving to Detroit is a deliberate process of gentrification" (Spencer). However, from this joke Moore proceeds to question larger structural issues: "we can kind of see the ways that gentrification, or neighborhood disinvestment, or just being a bad neighbor – all of the

⁶ Warner, too, employs the theme of haunting as a "heavy and eternal psychic toll" on real estate and raises the possibility of reparations: "Imagine each of these stately houses claimed by black families, rather than being passed around by white people to other white people for a million dollars a pop. Could be the sole cure for the haunting" (265). And yet, Warner bought a house and continues the chain of real-estate concentration in white hands.

things that go into our notion of gentrification—then we can kind of see the way that gentrification is a system that works outside of individual control" (Spencer).

Like Moore, Warner articulates feelings of guilt at having bought her way into the neighborhood, just like the potential investors she sees checking out real estate on her street. "I have to make sense of my own possible contribution to the change, [...] I somehow helped to boost the financial outlook of the block, the street, the neighborhood" (18). For Warner, her willingness to stay and unwillingness to participate in real-estate speculation may recompense her privilege: "I have only hoped to atone by sticking around, neither selling nor buying again" (224). She also confesses her shame at not having realized how socioeconomically different her status is from that of her neighbors: "My privilege contributed to making me an owner here and not a renter. That I ever glossed over that fact isn't an easy admission" (225). Both writers express how ethical decisions and (self-) realizations about privilege in the gentrifying city are not "easy." Their memoirs are driven by various conflicting emotions that coalesce around homeownership in the US and the question of how it can be compatible with feminism. These affects range from guilt and shame over acquiring a house and possibly having displaced its previous inhabitants, to resignation at needing a stable home due to their health struggles, relief at ending a precarious lifestyle, anxiety surrounding the financial obligation of keeping the house intact,⁷ and finally hope to be part of a community of neighbors (and Warner's renters).

In addition, both memoirs offer a quirky, comic self-narration of their gardening. As gardeners, Moore and Warner express humility and amusement at their failures, pride and astonishment at their achievements, and gratitude to their neighbors and friends for support. Again and again, they demonstrate their capacity for self-criticism and self-parody. After the winter, Warner's "arborvitaes had died horrible, crispy deaths" (96). Her word choice resonates with that of Moore who speaks of "two young junberry saplings" being "murdered" (108). Whereas guilt factors into these moments, so too does humor. Warner continues "I went out to the yard to do the landscaper's walk of shame – digging up the root balls of the very dead trees" (96). Their failures at gardening do not diminish the pleasures these women find in gardening as physical activity and place-making practice.

When Moore visits a garden center with a friend "who wants to support my new life endeavor" by gifting her gardening appliances, she refuses an upscale nozzle for her garden hose: "He believes he has selected a state-of-the-art tool that I will use every day. But what I see is a shiny, overly elaborate gewgaw that my neighbors will see me using" (142). Not wanting to showcase her seeming economic privilege, Moore feels shame despite her gratitude for her friend's much-needed gifts. Her description renders these complex emotions humorous by highlighting the absurdity of their different perspectives on something as small as a nozzle.

⁷ Moore and Warner's houses are not as renovated as they had hoped, with expensive structural repairs creating financial challenges.

As Emmet shows, within Western modernist garden writing, a "comical and lighthearted approach" can be found in the works of Katherine White, Vita Sackville-West, or Karel Čapek. He argues: "such writing depended on not taking oneself (or one's gardening) too seriously. Such humor assumed a context of comfortable domesticity, along with a class of readers surrounded by (or longing for) material comfort" (58). The feminist writers' humor stylistically is informed by these previous modes of garden writing. Whereas their self-criticism and awareness of their complicity in processes of gentrification appear as a source of concern to be treated seriously in the rest of their writing, when it comes to passages set in the garden, these writers are much more at ease with their social status.

Moore's memoir uses a staple of garden writing, the "comedy of surplus" or the unexpected gift of the garden turned curse due to its multiplicity. The gift is a plentiful harvest of pumpkins after a neighbor's pumpkin decomposed in her yard: "pumpkin plants grow from every crevice, vining up every fence, stick, gat, and other plant that they can find" (42). As Atkinson demonstrates, gardening practices may offer alternatives to the "zero-sum arrangements" of capitalism "because in the garden plot, where market values do not trump all other values and considerations, the grower's dilemma commonly revolves around schemes to *distribute* some outrageous surplus" (10). After giving away as many pumpkins as she can, Moore assembles the neighborhood kids to carve the remaining pumpkins into Halloween decorations, a holiday custom the children are unfamiliar with "partially because their families are from Bangladesh and partially because the holiday [due to arson and vandalism] has been largely criminalized in Detroit [...] The children are delighted. Finally, Halloween! Their mothers are angry at me for wasting food" (42/43). It is striking that the Halloween decorations created by Moore and the children anger some of her neighbors as wasteful, as turning valuable food into seemingly worthless decorations, whereas the humor in this scene lies in the abundance generated by Moore's garden. The passage demonstrates how within the context of the urban garden value and waste are subjective.

What does it mean that these critical feminist writers who are so open about things going wrong in current gentrifying cities, at the same time, exhibit such a capacity for humor when it comes to their gardens? Moore expresses "a tiny bit of guilt" at having to "kill" certain plants or weeds to grow others. When she comments on this process of selection, it is hard not to read this gardening activity as simultaneously referring to her ongoing reflection on her presence in a gentrifying city: "it is part of learning to trust your instincts as a grower and set boundaries for yourself as a human. But sometimes the guilt stacks up, and I catch myself thinking, God, all I'm really doing is condemning stuff to death that doesn't please me" (185). This may seem a crass commentary on how through gentrification certain tastes and needs are privileged (those of affluent citizens) and entire neighborhoods are remade to accommodate these new inhabitants. However, the parallel between gardening and gentrification only sometimes holds in these gentrifier memoirs, because at other times gardening appears to reconcile feelings of guilt and shame that the writers feel regarding their homeownership.

This second section has explored the feminist gardener-gentrifier's relationship to the city, its transformations (green gentrification), and urban community activism. Despite being indebted to political traditions of radical gardening, these memoirs exclude any mention of anti-gentrification organizing. While Moore and Warner's memoirs seek ethical engagements with their own privilege, the feminist ethic of gardening in the gentrifying city that these texts begin to articulate is an individualized, improvised practice. Their desire for such an ethic is highlighted in the complex emotions the feminist gardener feels as a privileged newcomer to her neighborhood. And yet, perhaps this feminist ethic manifests more clearly as a writing practice of critical analysis and self-inspection than as a political activist practice to build anti-gentrification coalitions.

Conclusion

Due to its seemingly apolitical nature, gardening within privately owned spaces may serve as an example of green gentrification and a leisurely practice of home improvement, furthering the value of real estate. This essay was interested in how feminist writer-gardeners remain committed to feminist visions of equality and the fight against racism, sexism, and classism, while at the same time benefiting from a phenomenon like gentrification. Through gardening, the antagonistic position of gentrifier might be reframed, emerging from the texts of Moore and Warner as a subject position necessary for understanding their privilege as well as the social interactions within a changing neighborhood. While we should appreciate the work that Moore and Warner do as writers, including their self-critical reflections (at times using the tool of humor), there are limitations to this work.

The improvised moments of connectedness and informal networks of neighborly care, enabled through the exchange of gardening knowledge, harvested produce, or cow manure never serve as more than an unrealized potential for anti-gentrification activism. Neither memoir describes more concrete coalition-building practices comparable to those of radical community gardeners. A return to the uneasy relationship between the individual and the collective (that is a driving dynamic of both feminist memoirs and urban autobiographical writing) reveals that these feminist gentrifier memoirs at times fail to "use personal struggle as a lens for confronting and combatting those structural injustices," and rather "reduce political, structural, and public issues to personal struggles" (see Mitchell 209). While their gardening practices with immigrant neighbors open the white feminist gentrifiers' eyes to their involuntary involvement in gentrification processes, they also at times relieve feelings of guilt over privileged homeownership.

At its core, the feminist gentrifier memoir is a paradoxical text. The memoirs demonstrate how understanding oneself as a gentrifier is a necessary first step for combatting gentrification. Taking up the subject position as gentrifier can never be a dead-end to conversations but causes further difficult questions surrounding privilege and political action. Finally, despite the problematic absence of concrete political action, through their memoirs, these feminist gentrifier-gardeners may inspire further conversations and even activism in their readers—whether these readers understand

themselves as urban gardeners (yet) or not. These writers, each in their locally specific contexts, seek to develop a feminist ethic of neighborly gardening. And yet, this ethic looks much more like an individualized practice than a more concrete step towards taking an activist stance against the dilemmas of green gentrification.

Submission received 7 August 2022

Revised version accepted 26 February 2023

Works Cited

- Armentrout, Katje. "Pastiching the Pastoral: Hipster Farmers and the Commodification of American Culture." *Hipster Culture: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives*, edited by Heike Steinhoff, Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 85-102.
- Atkinson, Jennifer Wren. *Gardenland: Nature, Fantasy, and Everyday Practice*. Georgia UP, 2020.
- Borosch, Juliane. "Changing the Metonymy: Michigan Central Station and the Face of Detroit." *U.S. American Culture as Popular Culture*, edited by Astrid Böger and Florian Sedlmeier, Winter, 2022, pp.407-428.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *My City Highrise Garden*. Rutgers UP, 2017.
- Cresswell, Tim. "Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions: A Geographical Interpretation of Metaphors of Displacement." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 87, no. 2, 1997, pp. 330-345.
- Danielewicz, Jane. *Contemporary American Memoirs in Action: How to Do Things with Memoir*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Derringer, Nancy. "'Write A House' substitutes cash for fourth house grant, may eventually shut down." *Deadline Detroit*, 13 Aug. 2019, <https://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/23020/write-a-house-substitutes-cash-for-fourth-house-grant-may-eventually-shut-down>.
- Emmett, Robert S. *Cultivating Environmental Justice: A Literary History of U.S. Garden Writing*. U of Massachusetts P, 2016.
- Finch, Jason, Lieven Ameel, and Markku Salmela, editors. *Literary Second Cities*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Goldman, Robert. *Renovating Value: HGTV and the Spectacle of Gentrification*. Temple UP, 2021.
- Haefs, Elisabeth. *Scripts of Community Gardening: The Inclusive Green City Plot in Portland (Oregon) and Essen*. 2022. University of Duisburg-Essen, PhD Dissertation.
- Hamilton, Trina, and Winifred Curran. "From 'Five Angry Women' to 'Kick-ass Community': Gentrification and Environmental Activism in Brooklyn and Beyond." *Urban Studies*, vol. 50, no. 8, 2012, pp. 1557-1574.
- Katzenberg, Chris, and Kornelia Freitag. "Scripting the Inclusive City, Narrating the Self: Contemporary Rust Belt Memoirs in Poetry and Prose." *City Scripts: Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures*, edited by Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, and Maria Sulimma. Ohio State UP, forthcoming 2023.
- Kinkaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (Book)*. Macmillan US, 1999.
- Lindsay, Leslie A. "Gentrifier by Anne Elizabeth Moore Is More than a Memoir." *Always with a Book*, 15 Nov. 2021, <https://leslielindsay.com/2021/11/15/gentrifier-anne-elizabeth-moore/>.
- McKay, George. *Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism and Rebellion in the Garden*. Frances Lincoln, 2011.

- Mitchell, Kaye. "'This is Not a Memoir': Feminist Writings from Life." *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, edited by Jennifer Cooke, 2020, pp. 206-221.
- Moore, Anne Elizabeth. *Gentrifier: A Memoir*. Catapult, 2021.
- Peacock, James. "Those the Dead Left Behind. Gentrification and Haunting in Contemporary Brooklyn Fiction." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2019, pp. 131-156.
- Pearsall, Hamil. "New Directions in Urban Environmental/Green Gentrification Research." *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, edited by Loretta Lees with Martin Phillips, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018, pp. 329-345.
- Purk, Antonia. "A Photo Album of History: Ekphrasis in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*." *America after Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment*, edited by Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun, 2016, Winter. 349-367
- Schlichtman, John Joe, Jason Patch, and Marc Lamont Hill. *Gentrifier*. U of Toronto P, 2017.
- Schuller, Kyla. *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*. Bold Type Books, 2021.
- Spencer, Keith A. "In a riotous and timely memoir, a writer tells her story of winning a 'free' house in Detroit." *Salon*, 10 Oct. 2021, <https://www.salon.com/2021/10/10/anne-elizabeth-moore-interview-gentrifier/>.
- Warner, Vikki. *Tenemental: Adventures of A Reluctant Landlady*. Feminist Press, 2018.
- White, Monica M. "Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 13-28.
- Wolch, Jennifer, Jason Byrne, and Joshua P. Newell. "Urban Green Space, Public Health, and Environmental Justice: The Challenge of Making Cities 'Just Green Enough'." *Landscape and Urban Planning*, vol. 125, 2014, pp. 234-244.
- Zukin, Sharon. *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. 2010, Oxford UP.

The Dirt Witches' Counter-narrative: A Response to Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*

Prudence Gibson
University of NSW, Sydney.
p.gibson@unsw.edu.au

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4872>



Abstract

Murray Bail's 1998 novel *Eucalyptus* is an exposition of land ownership, plant classification and human-land relations, using a fairy tale structure. Bail uses parodic excess to deftly undermine settler preoccupations and European traditions that have historically been transposed onto the Australian bush. However, upon a second reading twenty-four years after the first, this author detected an absence of decolonial context in the book, relative to the time of publication, and an unintended reinforcement of misogyny that requires fresh interrogation. This author's own work as a member of a Dirt Witch collective presents as a dovetailed creative object—an urban forest artwork 2021—and allows a witchy reading of Bail's 1998 book and more contemporary attempts to redress colonial failures. It also allows an interrogation of the way the novel re-stereotypes Australian women on the land, re-oppresses both land and women and reinforces the very misogyny it was purported to expose.

Keywords: Critical Plant Studies, eco-feminism, sustainable counter-narratives, urban forests.

Resumen

La novela *Eucalyptus* de Murray Bail de 1998 es una exposición de la propiedad de la tierra, la clasificación de las plantas y las relaciones entre los humanos y la tierra, utilizando una estructura de cuento de hadas. Bail usa el exceso paródico para socavar hábilmente las preocupaciones de los colonos y las tradiciones europeas que históricamente se han trasladado al *bush* australiano. Sin embargo, en una segunda lectura veinticuatro años después de la primera, este autor detectó una ausencia de contexto decolonial en el libro, en relación con el momento de la publicación, y un refuerzo involuntario de la misoginia que requiere un nuevo interrogatorio. El propio trabajo de este autor como miembro de un colectivo de *Dirt Witch* se presenta como un objeto creativo encajado, una obra de arte de bosque urbano 2021, y permite una lectura mágica del libro de Bail de 1998 y los intentos más contemporáneos de reparar los fracasos coloniales. También permite cuestionar la forma en que la novela vuelve a estereotipar a las mujeres australianas en la tierra, vuelve a oprimir tanto a la tierra como a las mujeres y refuerza la misma misoginia que pretendía exponer.

Palabras clave: Estudios críticos de plantas, ecofeminismo, contra-narrativas sostenibles, bosques urbanos.

Introduction

I read the 1998 novel *Eucalyptus* by Australian author Murray Bail in the year of its release, while working as a curatorial assistant at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. Seven years earlier, Bail had written a book on the lauded Australian artist Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), who was a reclusive and obsessive artist. The Fairweather book was well-thumbed by my art gallery colleagues and me, so the emergence of the novel *Eucalyptus* promised literary skill, and a continuation of Bail's interest in difficult, complicated men. *Eucalyptus* follows the character of Holland, a middle-aged man who buys a property, clears most of the extant trees and then introduces hundreds of different Eucalyptus species from all over Australia. Bail's protagonist Holland advertises his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can name every single Eucalyptus species on his property. The fairy-tale mode of the novel served as an exaggerated and parodic literary approach which, coupled with the exquisitely detailed dataset of eucalyptus nomenclature, created a dizzying literary spectacle with vegetal aplomb.

This essay, however, reveals my own growth as a reader from 1998-2021, and my despair upon realising I missed a critical element in my reading of the book. Some slight discomfort upon my first reading, grew exponentially upon my second reading, as I eventually identified the reinforcement of misogyny and lack of care/respect for women. Back in 1998, I also missed the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, appropriate acknowledgement of First Nations peoples or even a presence in the novel. Described at the time of publication as a contemporary fairy tale, the novel also reflects imperialist, colonial approaches to the Australian landscape, the exertion of mastery over trees and obscures (erases) the attendant lives and presence of First Nations People (cf. Martin).

This essay adopts an eco-critical reading of the novel, by drawing on Val Plumwood's discourse on mastery, already in circulation at the time of the novel's publication. It also draws on the history of the garden-as-construct (cf. Kincaid), on what constitutes an original scrub and whether a native garden is an appropriate extant term (cf. Martin 95-113), and on ongoing and often unconscious settler coloniality towards gardens (cf. Bousfeld). At the time of re-reading Bail's novel, I was one of six women—the Dirt Witches—who received a Sydney Laneways Art Project grant from the City of Sydney and built a now-permanent urban forest in a windy concrete city street in Sydney—the Dirt Witches Forest. A connection between the book and the challenges of our urban forest began to take form and suggested that no matter whether it is a heavy re-colonial hand or a light witchy touch, there are endless human challenges to deeply and truly respecting the land and its myriad gardens.

The Dirt Witches Forest is a protest garden full of banksia trees, kangaroo grass and sprawling snake vines. The Dirt Witches Forest was created by six artists and writers and was based on the structure and elements of the endangered Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub (ESBS) which comprises over 50 different Australian kinship species. It functioned as an artwork because, through its scale and its schismatic relation to the concrete street and building in the vicinity, it was an artwork of mimicry, of sympathetic magic and of dispute, in that it is not possible to re-wild places, nor to return to pre-colonial times. Our

group were interested in a global resurgent curiosity in witchcraft as an aesthetic of care. Witches can best be defined here as “the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt” (Federici 11). Following Isabelle Stengers’ advice to break the spell of capitalism, our group drew on our various heritages from Europe, South Africa and Asia to consider witchy connections and the history of witchcraft as one of healing, medicinal care and ritualistic celebration. We also noted the ongoing witch-hunts in Africa where women are still vilified and murdered as accused witches (cf. Meel).

Two years after the forest’s inception in January 2021, this essay asks how the Dirt Witches Forest can be culturally critiqued, when it falls under the historical shadow of such novels as *Eucalyptus*. One risk is that the Dirt Witches have inadvertently recolonised the ESBS scrub, despite our best intentions. Another risk is that the ritualism of witchcraft, associated with the Dirt Witches group (recorded incantations, western smoking ceremonies), created new and continuous stigma for women and also that they might clash with the generous Indigenous interaction we were given, although we were assured that a multiplicity of voices is acceptable.¹ This essay draws on *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail to interrogate the decolonial work the Dirt Witches did with our forest that attempted to avoid the colonial hypocrisies and non-Indigenous hubris of the novel.

Australia sometimes references the land as ‘Mother Nature,’ a place of maternal safety and generous providence. However, these associations, magnified in and by Australian literature, also have a razor edge of socio-political violence, rendering women inert, as distant providers and as mere background to male action. They also suggest a fetishization of the land as feminine, and by association as vulnerable to abuse, extraction and exploitation. This essay is an inquiry into how art, interpreted as an urban forest, can function as a counter narrative to the culturally influential Australian novel, *Eucalyptus*, that has, despite its literary accomplishments, amplified and aggravated ongoing psychologically and culturally violent interpretations of the land and women.

Within the Australian literary canon, Bail’s *Eucalyptus* contributed to the shaping of a country’s botanical and story-telling culture. It did this by developing a narrative of rural life on a semi-remote property, situated near an almost-failing country town, where the male protagonist performs his agency through gardening—the planting of hundreds of different Eucalyptus species. Some detail about the book: *Eucalyptus* won the 1999 Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, both of which elevated its literary and popular status. Praised as a modern fairy tale at the time of its publication (cf. McNeer), the book can also be read through an eco-feminist lens, as a story of control, mastery and patriarchal manipulation. In the first chapter of the book, there is this androcentric question: “Once upon a time there was a man—what’s wrong with that?” (Bail 3).

Early in the text, Bail describes the national landscape as a place of “isolation” and “exhausted shapeless women” (Bail 2). As eco-feminist theorist Val Plumwood explains, one of the most common forms of denial of women and nature is backgrounding and

¹ Consultation with Brenden Kerin, Redfern Metro Aboriginal Land Council, June 2021.

instrumentalising (cf. Plumwood 21). This refers to the removal of women and the natural world to the distance, as inert but useful, so that male action can be performed. In this instance, the action is Bail's character Holland's compulsive sourcing and planting of multiple Eucalyptus trees as both personal challenge, botanical test and as dowry for his daughter.

Parodic Elements in *Eucalyptus*

Bail's book exhibits elements of parody. There are provocatively sexist descriptions that some critics consider purposeful, such as Amanda Rooks who suggests the author was aware of, and working with, ecofeminist ideas of hierarchical gender dualisms which perpetuate domination, and oppression (cf. Rooks 24). Rooks maintains that it is clear that Bail is parodying patriarchy. However, this can be seen as dangerous thinking, because it serves to excuse the misogyny it purports to lampoon.

Examples of Bail's excessively parodic terminology include: "vagina-slit of the Cider Gum" into which the gardener "thrusts his arm" (Bail 72). Then there is the moment when Holland gives his daughter, Ellen, a Eucalyptus maidenii, named after one of the directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney. Soon after, Ellen discovers that a large rusty nail has been hammered into her tree-gift. The character Ellen is not even allowed (by Bail) to feel imposed upon but only registers "vague surprise at seeing a steel object embedded in the softness of Nature" (Bail 90). Is Ellen unaware of her father's exerted power and control because Bail follows the fairy tale modality of girl-as-innocent? Or is Ellen a helpless fool, in her creator's mind, unaware of the power exerted upon her?

There may be parody-as-excess at work in the novel, but there is little embedded critique at play, such as perhaps a narrator's stage-whisper or another character who could throw reasonable light upon the sexist excess. There is nothing to assure us that Bail's parody is not also a reinforcement of the misogyny at work. Likewise, there is no redemption, no moral consequences for character Holland's sexualised control. An absence of feminist independence or agency makes mockery of the attendant parody because there is no female vindication.

Mastery

Earth-raking and mark-making praxes can be seen in the novel *Eucalyptus*, as Holland rips and cuts, moves and controls his trees. It is very difficult to imagine what the land looks like after Holland's ravages, veiled as improvements, other than as a mess. Holland's marks on the land extend to marking Ellen, who is offered to the first man who can name the many hundreds of Eucalyptus trees on his rural property. She is finally 'saved' by an unnamed and mysterious man in the final pages of the book. This unnamed man appears throughout the book as a story-teller, second fiddle to the narrator.

Control, exclusion and the devaluing of women and nature are the toolkit of the colonial-landscape-mastery model. Bail slips into these mastery mistakes, that were presented and published five years earlier, by fellow Australian Val Plumwood in her

1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (cf. Plumwood 21). With Plumwood's work in mind, I note how Bail refers to the character Ellen in this way: "She was his daughter. He could do anything he liked with her" (Bail 10). Ellen's predicament connects to eco-feminist notions about absent mothers, as Plumwood notes: "The mother herself is background and is defined in her relation to her child or its father (Irigaray 1982), just as nature is defined in relation to the human as environment" (22). A mother's nurturing, as background to necessity, is borne out in Bail's text as Ellen's mother is another fairy tale plot absence.

Plumwood warns against rejecting the close association of women with nature, she warns against seeing women-nature associations as the failure of what she refers to as humanism, because to consequently remove women from nature results in further human isolation from nature. It perpetuates a violent and continued progression of exclusion and a devaluing of nature. In describing who undertakes these kinds of exclusion and devaluing, Plumwood refers to the "white, largely male elite" (23). She calls it the master model.

Bail's powerful novel develops the concept of a garden, a garden conceived in its artificial species diversity. But if the garden is the potential crucible for testing how to avoid mastery over plants and trees and if it can deflect re-colonising, then first it may be helpful to synthesise, from Bail's book, what not to do. For instance, in *Eucalyptus* there are constant references to the animality of Holland's daughter Ellen, such as her speckled beauty (speckled, like a pigeon egg; cf. Bail 130) or as an irritated horse (cf. Bail 112). In addition to Bail's fetishizing descriptions and elevation of Ellen as *other*, they are also absent of any individualism. These are standard characterisations of oppression in the story, revealed via ecofeminist-informed interpretations (cf. Warren). Ellen's character is never developed, but kept flat: there is only the response of the town to her speckled beauty. The only intense image of her is with swinging breasts as she squats in a creek to piss—again, an animalistic characterisation of women in order to keep them as irrational, basic and background to important action: "Sometimes Ellen was seen" (Bail 48), but she can never act. Thus the subtle oppression of women is perpetuated.

Holland's colonial mark upon the land is one of incision. He ringbarks trees – the cutting and removal of a circumference of bark, so that the tree above the bark line dies. He propagates the introduced species of Eucalyptus trees in straight lines. He alters and constructs, changes and manages his trees, to his exact and contrived taste. Media theorist Jussi Parikka has written about the history of human incisions in the landscape, as an anthropocentric obscenity of agriculture. Parikka refers to nineteenth-century geologist Antonio Stopponi's *Corso di Geologia* (1873), a text about the earth's surface as unearthed by human technology in a series of incisions, and then covered with the ruins of that same technology.

Bail's character Holland creates a kind of extended bush garden. Holland says, "This attempt to 'humanise' nature by naming its parts has a long and distinguished history" (Bail 36). So, Bail seems aware of the hubris and (again) mastery of the Linnean system of classifying, ordering and naming of plants, and may be using parody to critique such Euro-centric systems (cf. Upchurch). But, is this another instance where he uses a

parodic tone to relieve himself of authorial responsibility, and instead to re-colonise and re-objectify the trees, as assets, as objects of curious interest? There are no examples in the novel where Bail ascribes independence to trees, as existing without the necessity of human witness, without human consciousness. Had he done so, a sense of redemption would have prevailed—confirming and effectively completing the modernised fairy tale structure, as literary device.

Bail calls Holland's property a "museum of trees" (Bail 45). When Holland demands his daughter's suitor know the names of the hundreds of Eucalyptus trees on his land, Bail is reinforcing a masterful tradition of European knowledge as power, creating oppressions of class, race and gender. Albert Memmi refers to colonial distancing as a form of purposeful separation. This separation is between humans and the land, between native vegetation and constructed or contrived landscapes, as Holland created with his Eucalyptus trees. Holland separates himself from all other men, from the mess of remnant bush, from his daughter—beyond his image of her as fetishized female, of course. Memmi explains that the master defines himself by the exclusion of the other (cf. Memmi 75). The other being women and Indigenous peoples.

Naming, in European cultures, also carries legacies of class, power, imperial dominance, and settler exclusivity. Dan Bousfield wrote: "The language of botany, zoology and history is embedded in structures that refer to natives, immigrants, colonists, hybrids and aliens alongside invasion, immigration, competition, conquest, colonisation and pioneering" (Bousfield 20). Julietta Singh also writes of ways to disrupt mastery over land, people and women, and how to avoid falling back into new forms of linguistic and intellectual violence (cf. Singh 78). She proposes that anti-colonial writers such as Frantz Fanon and Mohandas Ghandi failed because they replaced colonial violence with protest violence and bodily self-governing violence, respectively. Singh's solution is using language to strip away colonial and neo-colonial masteries, by unlearning and then re-learning (cf. Lindon et al.).

The Dirt Witch Forest

If *Eucalyptus* was a fairy tale, then what can a modern witch do to find redemption in the story? Were we witches, when we created our Banksia forest, able to effectively use artistic language to unlearn and relearn human relations with plants? Witch and fairy stories are not unconnected, in the history of tales, and in the demonising of character types. Is the best answer to these challenges of mastery in gardening, and parallel mastery in story-telling, now for women to retain and reclaim the feminine by embracing the mad, the irrational, the witchy? Plumwood suggests a *reversal model* and that an anti-mastery model affirms women as nurturing and caring, celebrating life-giving powers and an immersion in nature.

Bail's narrator seems to hail and revere a more masculine view, and says, "it is this chaotic diversity that has attracted men to the world of eucalypts" (Bail 35). He also says, "Art is imperfect, unlike nature which is 'casually' perfect" (Bail 131). This is the gardening-art-aesthetic conundrum that leads to the next question of this essay: if

Eucalyptus failed in its attempt to parody the oppression of women and plants, and slid into reinforcement of that oppression, what part does the Dirt Witches Forest play in decolonising plants and mediating violence towards women, Indigenous people and plants? Holland's garden was a contrived human interference with the natural landscape. Holland's garden did not escape colonialist lack of care, did not escape the failure to acknowledge First Nations peoples.

Were we, The Dirt Witches, able to avoid similar constructed contrivances? As Susan Martin says in "Writing a Native Garden? Environmental Language and post-Mabo Literature in Australia," maybe Holland's garden was not a garden. Instead, Martin wonders whether Bail's *Eucalyptus* experiment was "disorganised" and "all native" and "too much like a forest" (Martin 95). In her diagnosis of the novel, Martin notes the propensity of non-Indigenous people to become consumed with bush ethos that appropriates Indigenous belonging. As Martin says, Indigenous knowledge was at first unrecognized or discounted but then acknowledged and incorporated but also misappropriated in efforts to repair records of dispossession of people and destruction of place. She also describes Holland's eucalyptus plantings as "gardenesque," a term coined by J. C. Loudon, who saw artificial planting as democratising for different classes, suggesting that access is key to the perfect notion of a garden as artificial vegetation. His ideology about garden symmetry and mimicry may have been contingent on the reading his journal *The Gardener's Magazine* and may also have reflected a social and political tussle for garden or public-land control (cf. Loudon 701-2). Either way the "gardenesque" concept adopted symmetry and order.

The sometimes scratchy and unresolved relationships between gardens versus forests or scrubs, between "gardenesque" symmetry or copying versus native scrubs, was interrogated by the Dirt Witches for our 2021 forest. Our forest was a scrub, not a forest, but it referenced the global trend of planting micro-forests to create dense vegetal spaces and biodiverse spaces in cities (referencing the urban gardener Akira Miyawaki (cf. Nargi). The forest was created by planting Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub, structured in a frame of old Sydney sandstone and located in a windswept concrete-jungle street in the business district of Sydney.

Whilst in the end we chose the Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub (ESBS), as a contiguous and endangered group of plants that are part of a particular ecology, we also researched what remnant bush would have been there, deep underneath Barlow St Haymarket in Sydney, where the Banksia Forest was grown. A group of phyto-archaeologists have done extensive research into the foundations of old buildings in Sydney to discover, via soil and pollen analysis, what plants once grew. Because there was a lack of municipal rubbish collection from terrace houses during early settlement in Australia 1800-1850, it's possible to find interesting evidence of organic matter from old rubbish pits and foundation fossils. In Haymarket, close to where we grew the forest, there were casuarina and eucalyptus trees, saltbush, native grasses and daisy bush. Nearby there were Chinese bush or *Cassinia arcuate* and *Swamp symphonema* (cf. MacPhail). This information is a means of considering the relationship of original plantings, and also of the tendency (whilst avoiding the desire) to re-wild the location or

restore the land to its original form. With increasing discussions among the Dirt Witches, we resolved that re-wilding a site is problematic because the original bush is no longer there to be seen or checked and therefore difficult to imagine.

The Dirt Witches decided to work with the ESBS. The reasons are as follows: it is endangered and as activists we wanted to draw attention to its plight; we could visit several locations of remnant ESBS and see how it grew in real time; it functions as a scrub with a set number of plants, groundcover and trees that are symbiotic and coexistent – therefore it exists in vegetal kinship; our forest was about four kilometres from the closest extant ESBS scrub and we liked the idea of creating a connection (even a copy) or dynamic between our forest and the remnant original bush.

A final reason we chose the ESBS was that there are extant custodians of the ESBS who we could talk to and ask for botanical cultural advice. They were the Indigrow Nursery experts at La Perouse, the Centennial Park ESBS gardeners, the North Head Sanctuary Foundation (ESBS group), the Moriah College Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub Caretaker Nicole Lewis and Sydney Land Council's Brendan Kerin. These practitioners and botanists gave us outstanding knowledge and advice about which 50-odd plants and trees were particular to this sandy soil, windswept bush that groans with old Man Banksia trees.

It was the Redfern Land Council's Brendan Kerin who told us that Indigenous people back-burned the groundcover, using fire stick farming that aims to reduce the fire fuel load on the ground, and even kept the low branches of the Banksia to a minimum to avoid big bushfires. Kerin, who came to the forest in July 2021 to do an Acknowledgement to Country, explained to the Dirt Witches that Indigenous people have high calf muscles (long ankles) so that the low-lying ESBS groundcover wouldn't scratch their legs too much.² Although he was joking, it is true that Australian Indigenous people successfully managed the scrub in most of the areas, by keeping the fuel on the ground to a minimum by controlled burning, and kept the larger trees from getting too large and overshadowing the mid-level and groundcover plants.

The Dirt Witches Forest grew quickly in the first few months. We put in two native stingless beehives, with water close by. The ground cover plants such as the native geranium, flourished. The shrubs such as the *Leptospermum*, *Correa* and *Prickly Moses* metastasized and the trees swayed and climbed higher, although one poor tree had to be hacked back and eventually died. The *Hardenbergia*, *Lomandra* and *Dianella* were soon luscious. We went to perform our care, mostly rubbish removal and weeding.

The Dirt Witches Forest became a site of six pairs of human witchy hands and about 30 species, plus bees. To avoid any chances of detachment and abstraction, Plumwood describes an ecological self that has mutual selfhood where the self makes connections with others (cf. Plumwood 185). The Dirt Witches grew closer to each other as humans; and remain so. We continue to work together and make decisions together, as a group. This sometimes meant no decisions were made at all. We performed some witchy

² Consultation with Brenden Kerin, Redfern Metro Aboriginal Land Council, June 2021.

ceremonies—wrote spells and incanted them, as performative gestures to past witchcraft, rather than to instigate any action.

Our multiple voices followed a decolonising reflexivity, that included First Nations consultation; a certainty that the forest was an artwork (constructed, conceptual and synthetic) not a re-wilding; an acknowledgement of First Nations cultural knowledge and prior understanding of effective sustainable scrublands; acknowledgement of absence and erasure of Indigenous plant knowledge in Australian plant institutions; better understanding of our own colonial pitfalls.

This decolonising strategy, to some extent inspired by the limitations of the novel *Eucalyptus*, takes into account the shortfalls of botanical naming and means that we are on the lookout for new systems of nomenclature and classification in the future. An example of improved naming systems is the kinship ecology system of Indigenous classification being undertaken by the Ocean Blue Project, based in Oregon and involving tribal members from the Choctaw Nation. Among other things, this environmental group works to cluster wildlife into 7-10 species that rely on each other to survive: the Cascadia Field Guide. Rather than using western taxonomy, this system of naming refers to kinship clusters which includes insects, plants and birds. The ESBS scrub works exactly in this way. It is synergistic and self-reliant, its species work together effectively and it relies on the small wattle birds, the stingless bees and lizards for the entire ecosystem to work. In essence, the ESBS is a kinship cluster.³

In terms of an ethics of care, there were challenges because this forest was not extant. The Dirt Witches grew it. So in a sense it was, and is, artificial. We made sure it wasn't overwatered or had been poisoned by local litter. We endlessly picked up the used syringes that had been tossed into it. Our ethics of care was enacted with multiple voices, and multiple witchy versions, but I'm not sure we can promise we weren't still instrumentalising the forest, for us, as an artwork. After all, we constructed the forest within a rectangular sandstone block frame. We chose the plants. We occasionally cut things back and trimmed a tree, checked on the bees and made sure they had water.

None of these activities is ethically perverse but it still functions as a performatively masterful activity. Jamaica Kincaid has written deeply about being master of her own garden, and of her ecological sovereignty. Julietta Singh has written about Kincaid's richly political garden writing and notes that Kincaid's gardening practice pitches her as an ethical subject, a subject that emerges from her experience of colonisation and into a new emerging master. Referring to Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: (1999), Singh writes: "Like those histories it elicits, the garden escapes and refuses the will of the gardener who desires mastery over it" (Singh 149).

Kincaid's book was kindly given to me back in 2018 when I met scholar Catriona Sandilands in Sydney. At a workshop, the day after her lecture, she handed me the book and said I must read it. Read it, I did. And it has, over time, made me reflexively anxious about what I was doing in my own garden and later, what we were doing in our Dirt Witches Forest.

³ Ocean Blue Project. <https://oceanblueproject.org/literary-field-guide-indigenous-classification/>

The difficulties were made clear in Kincaid's book. In her garden book, she says of her visit to the Chelsea Flower Show: "Almost ashamed of the revulsion and hostility they have for foreign people, the English make up for it by loving and embracing foreign plants wholesale" (Kincaid 104). This sentence made me reflect on the surge of interest in 1980s Australia in native plants, at exactly the time the general public was becoming more aware in public discourse about the violence and damage done to Australian First Nations people. This was a period leading up to the 1988 Bicentennial which was a celebration of 200 years of the white colony, and within that period, heated debate had begun to pulse. This was ten years before Bail wrote *Eucalyptus*.

This next sentence from Kincaid is one that came to mind when I re-read Bail's book and it also acted as a warning bell when the Dirt Witches began to plant our Banksia Forest: "It seems so clear to me that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to it dignified (agriculture) and useful" (Kincaid 140). While Kincaid is referring to the colonial changes to human-plant relations in Antigua, her childhood home, due to colonisers concepts of slave agriculture, it resonates beyond her geography, and into Australia's.

Julietta Singh notes that Kincaid's book is evidence of the way mastery concepts endure, that master/slave relations remain and that the garden is a site of mastery. Singh also notes that Kincaid's book reminds her that mastery is extant in both political and mundane life (cf. Singh 151). Singh also reminds her readers that violence and continued oppression of women and plants are perpetuated in mundane ways. In fact, perhaps it is the mundane activities of literary characters, such as Bail's Holland, that provide the worst kind of continued violence. In Rob Nixon's analysis of slow violence, they discuss those kinds of activist actions that are "able to articulate the discourse of violent land loss to a deeper narrative of territorial theft, as perpetrated first by British colonialists and later by their neocolonial legatees" (Nixon 132). Following Nixon's points, the Dirt Witches followed a witchy version of eco-activism—ecocritical thinking. Specifically we were preoccupied with an ethics of place, rather than perpetuating new displacements.

Singh reminds me, in spirit and via her book on mastery, that the Dirt Witches are mostly white women who all have a degree of affluence and political privilege and that "even within the ease of relative affluence, discomfort can persist and proliferate" (Singh 151). Kincaid in turn, shows how bourgeois discomfort works and leads to colonial dispossession of stories and theft of culture. Attempts to create awareness of plant conservation are forever clouded by the fact that Australia was never ceded by Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people to the white colonial invaders. Juliette Singh, who so brilliantly lays bare the ongoing colonial violence and masteries at play globally, also talks about her own mother's garden. Singh saw her mother's garden as magically flourishing and bountiful. However she also explains: "But if her garden—in all its glory—was a space of refuge for my mother, it was also one into which the discomforts of the home spilled out into the earth" (153). I think the only risk with Singh's memories of the garden and psychic extension of family relations is that, again, it presents the garden as artistic image. Gardening is a cultural act. For the Dirt Witches, it was an artistic act, a re-presentation of and by the human. By coincidence, Singh was a tree-planter in northern Canada during

her university summers, which she describes as brutal work. For her, tree-planting was her first experience of communal life.

For the Dirt Witches, our forest was not our first experience of communal life, but was our first garden-protest. Our conversations about what we were doing/attempting, at times, became heated. Our group was tight and loyal but not without discord. Our group struggled with language around our aestheticizing the banksia scrub. The canon of contemporary art works hard to resist aestheticizing nature and any reminders of those relapses are problematic. We admit to the contradictions and hypocrisies. We want to use them, for discussion and feedback. Crimes of dispossession against plants and people continue to be committed.

Should women, then, reclaim the witch-woman as an eco-feminist celebration of non-masterful relations? Feminist activism and witchcraft is on the rise due to its subversive potential (cf. Daskalaki). If women's resistance movements require social reproduction, a thesis proffered by Federici, then how did the Dirt Witches create productivity without being exploited or economically delimited? Well, we budgeted our labour. We were paid for our witchy work—our labour was not free. Murray Bail, in *Eucalyptus*, describes a local town by mentioning a woman. Bail describes the woman like this: she “could have been a witch” (Bail 57). The narrator's tone is disdainful, suggesting women as potentially crazy, or as-untrustworthy-as-witches. To decolonise the novel, it might be time to see an inherent suggestion in Bail's narratorial tone: there is power in the male fear of witches.

Submission received 2 August 2022

Revised version accepted 6 March 2023

Works Cited

- Bousfield, Dan. “Settler Colonialism in Vegetal Worlds.” *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020, pp.15-33.
- Didur, Jill at al. *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities Postcolonial Approaches*. Routledge, 2015.
- Federici, S. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd ed.). Autonomedia, 2014.
- Kerin, Brendan, Consultation with Brenden Kerin, Redfern Metro Aboriginal Land Council, June 2021.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (Book)*: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
- Lindon, H.L., L.M. Gardiner, A Brady, and M.S. Vorontsova. “Fewer than Three Percent of Land Plant Species Named by Women: Author Gender over 260 Years.” *Taxon*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2015. DOI: [10.12705/642.4](https://doi.org/10.12705/642.4).
- Loudon, John Claudius. “Review of Practical Hints on Landscape Gardening.” *Gardener's Magazine*, vol. 8, 1832, pp. 701–2.
- MacPhail, Mike. “A Hidden Cultural Landscape: Colonial Sydney's Plant Microfossil Record.” *Australian Historical Archaeology* 17, 1999, pp.79-109 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29544433>

- McNeer, Rebecca. "Happily Ever After: William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*." *Antipodes*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2002, pp. 171-176
- Martin, Susan K. "Writing a Native Garden? Environmental Language and post-Mabo Literature in Australia." *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities Postcolonial Approaches*, edited by Jill Didur et al., Routledge, 2015, pp. 95-113.
- Meel, B.L. "Witchcraft in Transkei Region of South Africa: case report." *African Health Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009.
- Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Profile Books, 1965.
- Nargi, Lela. "The Miyawaki Method: A Better Way to Build Forests." JSTOR Daily 24 July 2019. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-miyawaki-method-a-better-way-to-build-forests/>
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Ocean Blue Project. <https://oceanblueproject.org/literary-field-guide-indigenous-classification/>
- Parikka, Jussi. "The Anthropocene: Deep Time Designs." *Exhibist*, no. 10, 2016, pp. 41-44.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1994.
- Rooks, Amanda. "Parodying Patriarchy: Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* and the 'Logic' of Domination." *LINQ*, vol. 34, 2007, pp. 24-33.
- Upchurch, Michael. "Enchanted Forest." *New York Times Book Review*, 4 October 1998, p. 6.

Sensing Scale in Experimental Gardens: Un-Lawning with Silphium Civic Science

Aubrey Streit Krug
The Land Institute, USA
streitkrug@landinstitute.org

Ellie Irons
Independent artist and scholar, USA
ellie@ellieirons.com

Anna Andersson
The Land Institute, USA
andersson@landinstitute.org

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4831>



Abstract

Gardening experiments are timely in the context of what many now call the Anthropocene, an era that highlights questions of how humans collectively relate to the larger Earth systems in which we are embedded. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, Timothy Clark reflects on the “unreadability” of the Anthropocene. He invites ecocritics to address this challenge by practicing “scale framing,” reading texts in variable and increasingly broad scales, and engaging the contradictions that emerge. We applied a scale framing approach to a story of relationships with *Silphium integrifolium* in an experimental gardening project. Silphium is a native North American perennial prairie plant being domesticated as a future oilseed crop. We are researchers and participants in a civic science project, in which individual garden sites are designed to collect data on and conserve silphium ecotypes while being linked into a wider network. In particular, we analyzed a civic science video story created by Ellie Irons called “Un-Lawning with Silphium.” Through our ecocritical analysis, we generated a framework to visualize nested and cross-scalar relationships in gardening projects. This framework could help inform the design and assessment of experimental gardening projects that feature the arts and humanities (e.g., digital narratives, ecocriticism, and pedagogy) and connect them with the natural and social sciences (e.g., plant breeding, botany, geography, and ecology) through transdisciplinary and participatory research methodologies for public engagement (e.g., civic science). We found that civic science gardening with silphium, and other gardening experiments in the Anthropocene, can guide public sensory engagements with scale, help spark recognition and investigation of contradictory scale effects, and motivate us to imagine and build relationships of caring responsibility.

Keywords: Civic science, garden, plants, scale framing, story.

Resumen

Los experimentos de jardinería son oportunos en la época que muchos denominan el Antropoceno. En esta época resaltan preguntas sobre cómo los seres humanos se relacionan con los sistemas terrestres que los rodean. En *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept [Ecocrítica al borde: El Antropoceno como concepto umbral]*, Timothy Clark reflexiona sobre la “ilegibilidad” del Antropoceno. Invita a los ecocríticos a afrontar este desafío utilizando “scale framing” [marco de escalas], leyendo textos

utilizando marcos distintos y cada vez más grandes y analizando las contradicciones que surgen entre escalas. Aplicamos este enfoque a historias de relaciones con *Silphium integrifolium* que surgen en un proyecto experimental de jardinería. El silphium, una planta perenne originaria de las praderas norteamericanas, se está domesticando como futuro cultivo oleaginoso. Somos investigadores y participantes en un proyecto de ciencia cívica en el que se diseñan huertos individuales mientras se participa dentro de una red más amplia, para recopilar datos sobre los ecotipos de silphium a fin de conservarlos. Analizamos "Un-Lawning with Silphium", un vídeo de ciencia cívica creado por Ellie Irons. A través de nuestro análisis ecocrítico, generamos un marco conceptual para visualizar las relaciones anidadas y trans-escalares en proyectos de jardinería. Este marco conceptual podría orientar al diseño y la evaluación de proyectos experimentales de jardinería que incorporen las artes y humanidades (como narrativas digitales, ecocrítica y pedagogía) y los integran con las ciencias (como fitomejoramiento, botánica, geografía y ecología), empleando metodologías transdisciplinarias y participativas para generar un compromiso público (ciencia cívica). Descubrimos que la ciencia cívica mediante la jardinería de silphium, y otros experimentos de jardinería en el Antropoceno, invitan a la reflexión pública sobre la escala mediante actividades sensoriales, fomentan el reconocimiento y la investigación de los efectos contradictorios de la escala, e impulsan la imaginación y la construcción de relaciones solidarias.

Palabras clave: Ciencia cívica, jardín, plantas, escala, historias.

Introduction: Gardening Collaboration

Silphium integrifolium (silphium, silflower, rosinweed) is a perennial prairie forb (herbaceous flowering plant other than a grass) with many-petaled yellow blossoms that attract a multitude of pollinating insects. Silphium is native to North America, may have genetic origins in the Southeast (Raduski et al.), and has grown and co-evolved in ecosystems Indigenous peoples know as homelands. Ethnobotanical records document Meskwaki medicinal uses of *Silphium integrifolium* in the early 20th century (Smith 216). Further research is needed to better understand historical and contemporary human communities' relationships to this particular plant species both culturally and ecologically.

Silphium's range in the contemporary United States spans east from Indiana, west to Colorado, and as far north as Minnesota and as far south as Texas ("Silphium integrifolium Michx."). Because this species has such a wide range, silphium has also developed many differing growth habits to survive and thrive in these unique habitats, such as different morphologies and variable climate adaptations, and expresses resistance to susceptibility differently to biotic pressures in contrasting environments.

As a perennial with a deep root system, silphium has the potential to access water deeper in the soil profile than annual crops, and also could sequester carbon and hold soil with those living roots. The potential to use silphium's seeds as an oilseed grain similar to sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is being pursued through crop domestication (Van Tassel et al.). As a perennial grain, silphium could help conserve and restore ecological processes while providing human food.

Maintaining ecotypes, or locally adapted varieties within the species collected from across silphium's wide range, is of interest to researchers in order to preserve genetic diversity for future domesticated varieties and to make seed available for research and restoration. This interest catalyzed a silphium ecotype conservation civic science project beginning in 2020 in which participants were invited to plant, care for, and study garden-scale plots of different silphium ecotypes (Figure 1). Researchers in plant

breeding and botany, ecology, the environmental humanities, and participatory methods created the project.

The three of us co-authoring this article began collaborating in the context of this civic science project. Aubrey Streit Krug co-initiated and leads the civic science research program that includes this and other experimental projects. While she grew up in close proximity to silphium, she didn't know *Silphium integrifolium* by name until beginning to work with colleagues at The Land Institute. She now regularly interacts with silphium in a range of locations, including her backyard, and she is motivated to facilitate caring human cultural relationships with perennial grain crops across geographies for the long term (Streit Krug). Anna Andersson's international and interdisciplinary inquiry into the arts, psychology, geography, ecology, pedagogy, and community organizing has informed her approach to joining the civic science research group at The Land Institute, where she stewards communities and projects. She has identified silphium in prairies, created educational materials about the plant for non-scientists, and most recently, planted silphium in her home space for the first time.

Ellie Irons was one of the civic scientists selected to join this project. She was motivated to volunteer because of her long engagement with plants and land as artistic partners, and her curiosity about perennial agriculture and the domestication process. Irons received Ecotype #1 to plant in Troy, New York—2,400 kilometers away from the original source site. The wild ecotype Irons tends and conserves was collected on Ponca land, currently the US state of Nebraska. This *Silphium integrifolium* ecotype seed was collected in 2017 by John Holmquist, a research technician at The Land Institute. Ecotype collection efforts have continued to the present day by other researchers, spanning across the central United States.

The experimental gardens for silphium ecotype conservation that we will describe feature labor, observation and negotiation, inquiry and reflection, cooperative sharing of data, and creaturely competition for food and energy. The writing of this article about our research collaboration has also itself been a collaborative process. Each of us made distinct contributions during the writing and revision process, and we have noted in the text when our individual vantage points and situated knowledges are particularly relevant to the interpretations offered. Generally, though, we have worked to provide a shared ecocritical analysis and collective voice.

This article was sparked by the silphium story shared in video form by Irons at the end of the project's 2021 growing season (Irons, "Un-Lawning with Silphium"). Amid the diversity of stories invited and submitted in the civic science community, this video caught our attention as researchers because of the way it engaged with scale. Civic science experimental gardens had begun with an open-ended sense of what civic scientists—and researchers—might learn. Through experience, we started to notice how scale was emerging as a conceptual and practical theme. For example, the civic science research group engages with scale in terms of translating research questions into accessible educational materials and meaningful scientific activities, and in terms of the size of the project and whether or how to grow it.

Challenging questions arose as we tried to navigate the everyday experiences of facilitating and participating in the silphium ecotype conservation civic science project in the context of rapidly changing planetary systems. How do we support the learning of civic scientists who have many constraints within their daily lives, and who are

simultaneously part of societies that are shaping systemic changes that exceed Earth's planetary boundaries? How do we help make connections between silphium research, the histories and contemporary communities of particular local places and landscapes, and the forces and systems driving global challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss?

Gardening experiments are timely in the context of what many now call the Anthropocene, an era that highlights questions of how humans collectively relate to the larger living Earth systems or ecosphere in which we are embedded. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, Timothy Clark reflects on the “unreadability” of the Anthropocene in terms of the “counter-intuitive relations of scale, effect, perception, knowledge, representation and calculability” (13). Clark invites ecocritics to engage this challenge, address the limits of our understanding, and practice “scale framing,” reading texts in variable and increasingly broad scales.

We applied this method of scale framing through an ecocritical analysis of Irons' video narrative about her relationship with silphium through the work of caring for this plant in an experimental garden plot. We found that, rather than try to uncritically scale up the method of civic science, we preferred to experiment with conserving silphium ecotypes in gardens. Scale framing inspires a framework for our project and potentially other projects to grapple with the contradictions of scale and to guide public sensory engagements with scale through gardening. This framework could help inform the design and assessment of experimental gardening projects that feature the arts and humanities (e.g., digital narratives, ecocriticism, and pedagogy) and connect them with the natural and social sciences (e.g., plant breeding, botany, geography, and ecology) through transdisciplinary and participatory research methodologies for public engagement (e.g., civic science).



Figure 1: Journey map of researchers, civic scientists, and plants in the silphium ecotype conservation civic science project. Illustration by Lydia Nicholson.¹

1. Researchers at The Land Institute develop scientific research questions that would lend themselves to be explored using the civic science method, and could help advance crop

¹ All figures and captions made by the authors.

- domestication of perennial grains. The journey between researchers, civic scientists and plants is initiated here.
2. Researchers collect wild germplasm seeds in remnant prairies in the central Great Plains and in other regions in the United States. They bring the seed back to a research facility where they are stratified, or cold treated to simulate winter dormancy for two to six weeks, are planted in a greenhouse, and are cared for until they are seedlings.
 3. People across the country express interest in participating in research and joining a civic science project. Based on their location and suitability for the research questions, civic scientists are selected to join the multi-year project.
 4. Seedlings are sent from the research facility to civic scientists via mail in the spring of the first year.
 5. Civic scientists plant 36 *Silphium integrifolium* seedlings in private and public facing settings, such as backyards, schools, or community gardens. They join the project with varying experiences in gardening, with many people having little or no prior relationship with silphium.
 6. Educational materials in various modalities, such as a printed field guide and captioned instructional videos, introduce civic scientists of all ages to the plant, project, and data collection protocols (The Land Institute).
 7. Through civic scientists' sight, touch, verbal, and written communication, participants in this project contribute data toward the three core research question themes: ecotype conservation, disease monitoring, and community learning. They collect and upload project data through an open-source digital infrastructure, CitSci.org, or share by email or phone.
 8. Civic scientists share their experiences and stories with fellow community members, such as by hosting garden tours, making project-inspired art pieces, and sharing on social media.
 9. Through webinars and site visits, the transdisciplinary community of civic scientists, plant breeders and ecologists, and civic science researchers gather throughout the season to share findings and build community.
 10. Harvested seeds and project feedback are sent back to The Land Institute. Feedback informs the next year's project design and educational materials to address barriers to participation and continue to support civic scientists. Researchers identify as learners alongside civic scientists.

Framing Scale

In invoking the themes of scale and the Anthropocene, we join a broad and varied conversation that has evolved over recent decades around how to understand, articulate, and act on human responsibility in and for this era. The Anthropocene itself is a fraught and contested concept (Davis and Todd, Moore). We are drawn to the importance of “contextualizing the Anthropocene.” In their article that uses this phrase, Frank Biermann and colleagues argue that “the Anthropocene can be a useful conceptual frame *only when* it is viewed from a cross-scalar perspective that takes into account developments at local, regional and global levels, variant connections among those levels and issue domains, as well as societal inequality and injustice” (342, , cursive in original).

We connect this cross-scalar perspective with Clark's approach of scale framing and boundary-sensing. Clark explores how different phenomena emerge in prominence as texts are read at different scales and contexts, and how such “scale effects” can produce “*contradictory understandings and evaluations at the same time*” (23, cursive in original). Following Clark's consideration of the power and limits of literature and ecocritical analysis in the Anthropocene, we wondered how scale framing might help us self-

reflexively investigate questions and decisions of scale in our civic science gardening experiments, making potentially contradictory understandings more apparent and thus possible to intentionally engage as we evolve current projects and design new ones.

To conduct scale framing readings required us to consider how to define scale. Is scale a predetermined system of classification that makes it possible to measure and study different sizes of phenomena? It can be, but given the collaborative nature of our approach, we have been intrigued by Marleen Buizer and colleagues' point that scale is constructed by humans as well as based in biophysical and material reality. They observe that scales "are increasingly being considered as co-produced in processes in which scientists and laypeople work together" (Buizer et al.). By choosing below to closely analyze a text produced by a civic scientist, and seeing what scales emerge as relevant during the reading process rather than choosing and applying them in advance, we hope to have generated a more collaborative and co-authored understanding of scale grounded in the context of our project.

Another framing of scale that we are indebted to is offered by Max Liboiron. Writing on anticolonial research methods in the sciences, Liboiron describes the significance of scale as one of relationality, emphasizing that "Scale is not about relative size. Scale is about what relationships matter within a particular context" (85). During our analysis, we found it helpful to name scales in terms of relationships. Identifying who is relating to who and what prompted us to consider how those relationships were realized, and our roles and responsibilities in them.

Picking up this theme of relationality, María Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us that while they may be asymmetrical, obligations exist across species (156). Thinking and acting on these obligations at the level of a single experimental garden patch, a network of distributed garden patches, or an intertwined human-plant partnership that exists across time and space (like the evolution and domestication of silphium in the past, present, and future) required tracing salient relationships and ties across scales.

The text we analyzed below does this work of tracing in the form of a narrated series of digital images, published as a video. Technological mediation therefore becomes relevant as we considered if and how scales are constituted, not simply recorded, which is an observation made by Gabriele Dürbeck and Philip Hübkes in the introduction to their edited collection, *Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene: Imagining Human Responsibility in an Age of Scalar Complexity*. They notice how it "matters on which scale a system is observed or analyzed" (cursive in original) because "the behavior at one particular scale can be literally incompatible to the behavior at another," similar to Clark's noticing of how scale effects can produce contradictory understandings (6-7). Grappling with our responsibility is not a simple matter: "responsibility cannot simply be upscaled from the level of the individual human being to the level of species" (7).

Alex Hanna and Tina M. Park question another form of upscaling in their writing "against scale thinking," the idea that in technological innovation there can be efficient growth without having to change or rethink "basic elements," so that ideas, businesses, and products are simply scalable or not. Hanna and Park further connect scale thinking with datafication, in which individuals are "rationalize[d] into legible data points." We realized that if we use a scale thinking approach or seek to simply scale up our civic science experimental gardening, civic scientists would become interchangeable data

collection cogs, erasing their local place connections and responsibilities to land in ways that maintain rather than challenge colonialism (Liboiron).

Participatory research methods can be susceptible to oversimplified ideas of scaling up, implying that more participants or bigger data collection initiatives are always better. Sometimes yes and sometimes no. Ultimately it depends on the project's ability to meet its scientific goals and ethical standards. Decisions about project scope require intentionality and awareness about capacity, values, and relationships. Potential impacts of growth on a project's integrity can range from destructive (e.g., researchers do not have the capacity to sustain or support relationships, and participants who expect more personal interaction don't receive it) to constructive (e.g., practitioners are pushed to innovate new approaches or efficiencies in program design to retain values alignment, or participant relationships are enhanced because of increased proximity to or access to more fellow participants with shared context).

Naming our work at The Land Institute as civic science has helped us try to accurately and specifically represent our method with regard to research relationships. Within the broader fields of participatory research and citizen science, we aim to convey our projects' contributory and collaborative nature in contrast to co-created or community-driven projects (Bonney et al.). Civic science questions so far have arisen from researchers rather than independently from communities. There are active conversations underway about the name "citizen science" and the vocabulary used to identify participatory and scientific research practices beyond traditional institutions (Shirk, Legrand & Chlou). We were introduced to the term civic science in 2019 by artist Carmen Moreno and appreciate how "civic" points to what members of a society do, their rights and responsibilities, and how their behavior affects others.

It remains critical for researchers and practitioners to focus on actions and approaches that advance inclusive research relationships with participants (Cooper et al.). In our work, civic scientists must be informed of and able to consent to expectations for their participation in the project and know what they can expect from us as researchers, so that everyone can fulfill their responsibilities in a community of trust. As we design and grow multi-year projects with perennial plants, we strive to right-size expectations, clearly communicate the opportunities and limits of our method, invest in pedagogical activities, and be accountable for our learning by seeking and acting on feedback and reporting back results, insights, and changes.

Civic science has continued to attune us to the directionality of scale, which can go down and out, not just up. Sensing scale means sensing different and new contexts of relationship: with civic scientists in their places, within our lab, with our colleagues, and with plants, crops, and agricultural and cultural systems. Relationships are central to the research questions we are pursuing in developing novel perennial grain crops. Domestication relationships may be advanced in part through participatory research that shapes civil society and co-creates food futures (Van Tassel et al.). Can we grow and deepen inclusive relationships, rethinking and evolving basic elements of our method as we go, rather than simply upscaling projects?

Hanna and Park write that mutual aid, or collective care, resists scalability because it encourages tangible connections between people in order to help meet their various needs. Civic science gardening experiments have provided an opportunity to begin to critically name, practice, distribute, and value the care work that people provide for

plants, places, and each other (Streit Krug). We consider that a starting place for building such critical, collective care that resists scalability might be a willingness to sense the reality of scale as relational. Gardening offers a tangible way to experience scale through temporal and embodied relationships with humans, plants and other creatures, land, and a range of systems and processes.

Un-Lawning with Silphium

Because of our interest as researchers in understanding relationships and learning, our civic science projects have been organized to invite participants to share their stories, reflections, and feedback along with other forms of data, such as scientific observations, measurements, samples, and photographs. In the second year of the silphium ecotype project, researchers specifically invited each civic scientist to reflect on their experience by creating and sharing “My Silphium Story” in whatever form they might like. Several optional prompts were provided, including instructions for a photo voice method in which one or more images could be selected by the civic scientist, who could then use their voice to describe how the image represented the story of their relationship with silphium. To engage civic scientists, particularly for those new to the experience, researchers facilitated two webinars focused on reflective storytelling activities, such as visually mapping relationships to silphium temporally and spatially and engaging in free-writing prompts.

Numerous stories in varied formats have been shared over the ongoing project, including narratives embedded in emails, handwritten notes sent back with harvested materials, phone calls, and handmade interpretational art pieces such as beaded clay sculptures representing *Silphium integrifolium* flowers at different stages (Whittier et al.). In December 2021, Ellie Irons submitted a silphium story in the form of a nearly 12-minute video recording featuring a series of 48 still photographic slides in roughly chronological order (Irons, “Un-Lawning with Silphium”). Some slides were a single photo and others were compilations of multiple photos, almost all of which were taken by Irons during her fieldwork over the first two years of the project. Irons created and narrated the slide show, speaking from a written script.

While all the stories shared by civic scientists have helped our research team get a richer picture of the impacts of civic science and improve and investigate our approach, Irons’ story was selected for analysis because of the way it engaged with scale. The novelty and detail of the extended photo voice format lent itself to closer analysis. In the future, we look forward to analyzing themes across multiple stories and growing seasons, including stories we have been gathering from ourselves as researchers and our research colleagues. We as researchers have participated in story creation along with civic scientists in order to support reflexivity and understand civic scientists’ experiences as they engage with project requests.

Before turning to a close analysis of Irons’ media artifact and the scales of analysis it provoked, it may be helpful to understand a bit more about Irons’ positionality and relationship to civic science. The silphium story Irons tells is centered around what she refers to as a “gap-filling lawn,” a detrimental form of land stewardship that is a default response to maintaining so-called vacant land in the Northeastern United States where Irons is based. Born in California, Irons is a guest on this land. Her ancestors came from

various parts of Europe, settlers on the American continent. Some of them lived in Troy two centuries ago, in the midst of colonial and industrial upheaval that continues to echo through this land today. As an artist, educator, and scholar she practices a form of interdisciplinary art that revolves around multisensorial fieldwork, combining socially engaged art and ecological art through the lens of multispecies studies.

Irons' interest in lawns and un-lawning grows out of a long engagement with weedy plants, urban ecosystems, and living sculptures. Intrigued by the potential of weedy plants to make depauperate lawn ecosystems more bioculturally diverse, Irons worked with sculptor Anne Percoco to create the *Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory (Lawn Lab)*, a series of sculptural un-lawning interventions that are guided by seeds lying dormant in the soil (Irons, "The Next Epoch Seed Library's Lawn Lab"; Irons, "Practicing Plant-Human Solidarity"). One particularly fruitful Lawn Lab intervention has continued as a long-term experimental un-lawning site and provides the focal point for the silphium story we analyze here.

With a goal of cultivating plant-human solidarity through artistic practice, Lawn Lab activates land-based sculptures with hands-on activities ranging from seed-saving workshops, to participatory fieldwork, to audio tours, creating opportunities for *phyto-centric pedagogy*: forms of teaching and learning with and from weedy plants. In framing her artistic practice as pedagogical, Irons draws on forms of land-based and place-based pedagogy infused with aspects of critical plant studies and anticolonial STS that insist on the agency of plants and the land as world-building partners. In her contribution to The Land Institute's request for "My Silphium Story" she turned to the concept of "storied land" (Paperson) and "seeding planthroposcene(s)" (Myers) to build a narrative out of a collection of many research photos taken over eighteen months with silphium. Combining these detailed plant-focused images with a voiceover that alludes to pasts and futures already present in the land, she wondered what each might learn from the intertwining of a human, an urban lawn, and a wild(ish) prairie plant.

With this context about the text's creator and the silphium civic science project in mind, we together analyzed the text produced by Irons. We did not select scales or build a framework of relationships in advance. Instead, Streit Krug first closely watched and re-watched the text, taking notes based on subject matter, imagery, point of view, composition, word choice, theme, and other rhetorical choices. These notes were informed by Streit Krug's training in ecocriticism and critical plant studies and experience in agricultural research. The notes were sorted into groups by Streit Krug based on her perception of relevant scales of relationship illustrated in the text. Streit Krug named these scale frames. Andersson and Irons then reviewed, edited, and provided feedback and questions to inform revision of the analysis. For example, Irons provided clarification and correction on the subject matter of several images. Through this iterative process, we co-authored the scale framing reading.



Figure 2. Screenshot of the opening image from Ellie Irons' "Un-Lawning with Silphium" video (0:00). The full-length video is available at <https://ellieirons.com/silphium/>.

The opening image of "Un-Lawning with Silphium" (Figure 2) (Irons, 0:00) was photographed from above the ground, looking down from a close perspective of perhaps 30 centimeters. A silphium plant is centered in the photograph, with two green leaves emerging symmetrically in opposite directions, their midribs tilting slightly off center from the vertical line of the photograph. The large silphium leaves stand out from the surrounding tangle of many other smaller leaves. Grasses, plantain, and clover are visible across the left half of the image, which appears to be in the shade.

In the right half of the image is an outstretched human hand, pressing down the grass, nearly but not quite touching the silphium. The fingers are straight and extended horizontally, in juxtaposition with the vertical orientation of the silphium leaves. The hand is bright with sunlight, with the shadows of a few blades of grass crisscrossing the light skin—one shadow is a straight line, contrasting with the curves of veins under skin—and sun glinting on a gold ring band.

In the upper left corner are the words of the video's title, "Un-Lawning with Silphium." Irons begins by stating, "My Silphium Story starts and continues with an urban lawn."

Beginning with and returning to the first slide's visual and verbal introduction, we analyze the video through four scale frames (Figure 7):

The Personal Scale, of Individual Human and Non-human (mostly plant) Bodies and Their Relationships to Each Other.

The video's opening makes apparent the proximity of individual plants and a human body, in textured detail. The main characters of silphium and Irons are introduced to each other and to viewers as co-actors and companions (00:00-02:30). The title indicates Irons works "with silphium" and the first image shows a particular moment of her hand positioned toward the plant.

Similar moments appear in the rest of the video, in which the majority of the images include silphium and only one, a selfie (11:22), shows Irons' face in detail. Instead, we see the plants through her eyes. A theme emerges of Irons visually understanding the scale of silphium plants based on their relationship to her body. As the silphium leaves get

bigger in their first growing season, she remarks on how they match “the width of my hand” (04:22). Later they are pictured with a boot next to them, which Irons explains: “At this point the wear of the season is visible on the silphium plants...but I also notice some of them are big enough I can measure them against my foot, rather than my outstretched hand” (05:52-06:03). The following spring, when “the first tips of new silphium leaves” emerge, they are shown next to Irons’ finger tips, so close that we can see the number on the accompanying orange plant tag (06:57). Irons illustrates differences within plants in the small plot by using comparative images that include her hand as a reference point.

Another image, zoomed in on a single silphium leaf, includes some of Irons’ fingers holding the leaf steady. From this close-up Irons describes the results of her and others’ scientific and aesthetic gaze: “I also observe the first extensive brown patches on silphium leaves—in consultation with [project researchers], we decide they are insect damage—likely to the individual leaf layer, not rust...we observe how the discoloration is shaped in ways that match the leaf venation, and that it is flat, not raised...looking closely at the leaves is so satisfying...the sandy/hairy texture and intricate venation...wow!” (05:01-05:29).

The personal scale of relationship is also realized through the touch of Irons’ hands. As the plants grow up in the second year, Irons mentions her enjoyment of “the rough texture of their leaves.” As she conducts her first seed harvest, we see her hand holding a scissors and brown paper bag, getting ready to snip and collect the brown seedheads (Figure 3) (09:44-10:19). Not emphasized in the video, but implicit in this and other images, is the hands-on care work of experimental gardening that involves preparing space, planting seedlings, inoculating them, watering, weeding, harvesting, trimming back after harvest, and recording data—including taking all of these photographs. We will return to this point about mediation below.



Figure 3. Screenshot of hands-on preparation for plant harvest from Ellie Irons’ “Un-Lawning with Silphium” video (09:44-10:19).

The Garden Scale, of Human Community Relationships to a Plant Community, Neighboring Buildings, and the Seasons of the Year.

The opening image shows not just a silphium plant and Irons' hand, but also what Irons describes as "low-growing weedy plants" who are later named (03:42-03:49). The shade and sunlight in the video's opening image hints at what will become visible in subsequent images: the physical location of the garden with buildings around it, including one that casts a shadow. The garden scale of relationship connects groups of humans and plants within the bounds of a particular place. It includes Irons' child, a toddler shown sitting amidst the grass while Irons does fieldwork, and other human collaborators who come to help and visit (02:02). As the summer passes, we see a side view of the small square garden plots, now surrounded by brown grass, and Irons uses the plural first-person voice to narrate shared actions: "We haul water, and wait for rain" (03:36-03:38). In other images, signs showing the name of the partnering research institution and civic science project indicate more far-flung connections and suggest other similar garden sites exist in other community contexts.

Insects like spittle-bugs and bees are part of the garden, too, as pests and pollinators. Later, other taller plants are connected and compared to silphium: a wild sunflower relative, grown here for the purposes of supporting conservation and advancing agricultural domestication. A side view of the garden places the silphium flowers in the context of other wildflowers and domesticates, including tall blooming "cultivated sunflowers."

Returning to the opening image, the spring green of the young plant leaves establishes the seasonal chronology that organizes the story. Though Irons does verbally reference "pandemic time," not surprisingly, most of the visual and narrative developments of the video are tied to stages of plant growth or phenology, cycling through two years of seasons. The impacts of spring and summer warmth, drought, and rain are chronicled, as are fall and winter coolness, frost, and snow.

Finally, Irons' depiction of the garden scale includes a belowground component of the garden that is not photographed, but is noted several times in relationship to surviving seasonal turns. While it is out of the limits of perception, it is within bounds of community understanding. In the first fall, she remarks on the small silphium plants and her "hope they are growing robust root systems out of view that might help them overwinter and return strong in the spring." Later, a closing depiction of garden plots and signage in winter brings satisfaction and anticipation: "I enjoy knowing the Silphium is sleeping under the snow, their root structures intertwined with the rubble, roots of other plants, dormant grubs, seeds...waiting for spring" (Figure 4) (06:27-06:41).



Figure 4. Screenshot of garden plots and signage in winter from Ellie Irons' "Un-Lawning with Silphium" video (06:27-06:41).

The Lawn Scale, of Human Relationships to Landscapes Through Processes of Settler Colonialism, Urbanization, and Industrialization.

The video's opening image contains at least one clue to landscape-scale change: next to the silphium plant is *Plantago lanceolata*, narrow-leaved plantain, a species native to Eurasia introduced to and now common across disturbed landscapes of North America. The national and continental scale of settler colonialism, across decades and centuries rather than the yearly turn of seasons, is later alluded to by Irons as she names her particular location in the "post-industrial and residential neighborhood on Mohican land in current-day Troy, New York." Through narration accompanying a series of images that look up and out over the lawn, we learn not only its present location between buildings, as in the garden scale, but also its history and legal standing as property, owned by a landlord who does not live here. Irons explains that this is a "gap-filling lawn" that used to have a building on it (0:38-01:15).

The urban context of this lawn is made visible through Google Earth images; a street view shows power lines, and an aerial view includes the nearby Hudson River and stores like a convenience store and plumbing supply store. Irons references environmental harm done to the river and the people who live in this neighborhood over time by naming "industrial decline, redlining, and systemic disinvestment." The Hudson River bears the less visible, but impactful, legacy of industrial waste and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)—associated with the chemical Anthropocene (01:15-01:30). These persistent organic pollutants were released into the river north of current-day Troy between 1947 and 1977 by two General Electric capacitor manufacturing plants (US EPA). Other images throughout the video show the yellow metal pyramidal frames Irons uses to mark the silphium plots, and nearby asphalt and concrete associated with urbanization. An autumn photograph stands out, in which the point of view is from close to the ground, featuring the concrete texture of the bordering sidewalk with the lawn as a midline. A brown fallen leaf, edges curled up, is the punctum in focus along with cracks in the sidewalk; a human in the far background next to the plots is small and blurry.

In contrast to the personal and garden scales in the opening image and prompt of "My Silphium Story," Irons as the video creator and storyteller quickly asserts that her

story “starts and continues with an urban lawn.” The lawn scale recognizes how the planting and maintaining of lawns broadly changes landscapes, replacing native vegetation, and contributing to planetary impacts. Lawn is both place and process, connected with the processes of settlement and urbanization. Irons’ language recognizes this. In the quotation above, the urban lawn is the place for her story and a driver of it, starting and continuing it. And in the video’s very title, lawn is understood as a verb to assert the idea that processes of “un-lawning” are possible.

An image in the video shows un-lawning in the form of grass being removed. Tools—boots, a shovel, and a hammer—are included in the image, repurposed for the work of undoing industrial development. The result is finding “a layer of asphalt below the turf” (Figure 5) (01:51-02:00). Some asphalt gets broken and some remains intact. Through her Lawn Lab project, mentioned above, Irons works with a collaborator who takes soil samples. She summarizes: “We learn we have low to normal zinc, copper, and arsenic levels in most of the lawn, and a slightly elevated lead level in the back half of the lot—484 parts/million. Our precautions with touching and breathing the soil will continue” (08:11-08:41).

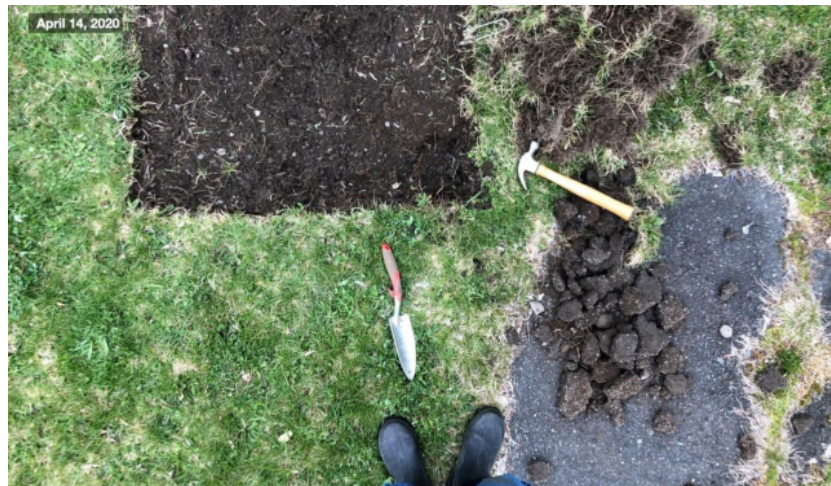


Figure 5. Screenshot of asphalt below the turf from Ellie Irons’ “Un-Lawning with Silphium” video (01:51-02:00).

The Food-Energy-Water Scale, of Human Relationships to Biogeochemical Cycles Through Agriculture and Fossil Fuels.

While the video’s “un-lawning” title directly evokes the lawn scale and names the need to undo it, the mediated digital form of the video itself can also be understood as indirectly pointing to an even broader scale and the need to engage it. From the start and throughout, the video sequences still photographs with voiceover. Despite the seasonal organization of garden images over time, there is no “smooth zoom” (Woods 134) spatially within or across images and scales. Like the experimental garden plots demarcated in space, each photograph is one snapshot in time from one vantage point, and the photographs switch as the narrator speaks and stitches them together with story.

The video juxtaposes images that foreground different and sometimes multiple scales, from the personal to the planetary, without resolving differences or completing the narrative. The project connects the narrator with silphium, and the experimental purpose

is also isolating silphium in these plots from potential interactions with other silphium. The lawn is being undone, and also most of it still remains in the lot along with an understory of asphalt. The garden is a place to convene community, and also due to lead in the soil and the pandemic time of the project, a place to take care when touching and breathing.

The broader scale of the food-energy-water nexus can be interpreted in the material infrastructure that is not foregrounded in the video but that makes possible the creation and dissemination of any video, including this one: the software and hardware, the internet and server farms, the energy grid and energy sources that power digital systems, and the food systems—from grain fields through supply chains, with the sun, nitrogen fertilizers, water, soil, other chemicals, machinery, transportation, processors, and retailers—that provide calories and nutrition to the humans who make, watch, and share digital texts.

Humans live in relationship to biogeochemical cycles, and in the Anthropocene these relationships are shaped by agricultural practices and the use of fossil fuels. The food-energy-water scale is also apparent in the video through the plastic in the garden. Early in the video is a frame of two images together: on the left is a seedling with several leaves, in a plot that is in the shade of the building in the morning; on the right is a toddler in the expanse of the lawn with a green plastic watering can (Figure 6) (03:37). The watering can crosses scales—relating a person to the act of caring for plants, a child to the human community of learning to garden, and an industrially produced object to the watershed—and infuses them with the planetary breadth and stakes of the food-energy-water scale.

How long will it take the plastic watering can, made with fossil fuels or petrochemicals, to decay? With the time scale of plastics in mind, we can recall their prevalence in the video: the plastic lawn chair set up for an audio tour of the garden offered during the ongoing pandemic; the white plastic tarp spread over the lawn, on which a group of people, wearing masks, gather in a cluster over a new garden plot; the soil samples, labeled with their location and elemental levels written in black sharpie on white stickers, pictured in clear plastic bags.



Figure 6. Screenshot of toddler with green plastic watering can from Ellie Irons' "Un-Lawning with Silphium" video (03:37).

Conclusion: Engaging Contradictions

Using scale framing to analyze the story of un-lawning with silphium civic science highlights contradictions between personal care work and planetary change. Does the story mean that we, as researchers and participants in a civic science project, are working to practice caring relationships for silphium plants and land? Yes. Does it mean that we are complicit in non-caring relationships between human cultures and societies and continental and global cycles? Yes. But if we cannot simply “upscale” our responsibility at individual and community levels, what do we do besides recognize the contradiction?

We found ourselves looped into the struggle of trying to face limits in the Anthropocene. Though our fossil-fueled petroculture encourages us to live as if there are not ecological or biophysical limits to the planet and to our own lives, this project has helped us become more attuned to practical limits. Our silphium ecotype conservation civic science gardening experiment and the research results it generates have been limited in scope and by our capacity and resources as project designers, facilitators, and volunteers. The silphium plants are limited in small isolation plots and by the biophysical resources they have access to in the locations of these plots. The stories we analyze, in writing and through the video, are limited in what they can convey and portray with the English language and digital photographs.

For instance, Irons’ siting of her silphium plots in a malnourished, gap-filling lawn has not been the ideal habitat for the formation of robust, productive silphium seed heads. The plants she is in relationship with have grown more slowly and produced less seed than silphium plants growing in rich garden soil. Simultaneously, their presence on this particular land created a logic and pretense for un-lawning, pushing the limits of comfort for a landowner who would otherwise maintain a trim, if ecologically bereft, lawn. The plants themselves continue to adapt and grow to meet this challenging habitat, while Irons and the surrounding human community have learned about their limits and capacities as plant caregivers, civic scientists, and neighbors. These are experiential, embodied learnings that can be described and analyzed, but not reproduced or repeated, as they are formed in relation to a particular sociocultural and ecological context.

The scales that we have framed, and the contradictory scale effects we have highlighted, prompt us to consider again the reality of scale as relational. A single lawn moves toward becoming a garden, a place that can produce and sustain food, biodiversity, and plant-human solidarity. This is one small contribution toward moving through, or against, the Anthropocene, and must happen again and again in myriad ways across societies that have an extractive orientation toward land and the life it sustains. Across the silphium ecotype conservation plots, similar relationships have been negotiated daily. Irons’ story and our analysis prompted us to grow in awareness and intentionality of the scales we have engaged with, and the relationships we are responsible to, as civic science researchers, project designers, and silphium stewards. Reflecting on our experiences and analysis, we now ask ourselves: what might communities that feature caring and responsible human-silphium relationships look and feel like in a future with less plastics, or without the fossil-fueled systems which currently help power our lives, work, and the digital infrastructure of a decentralized network?

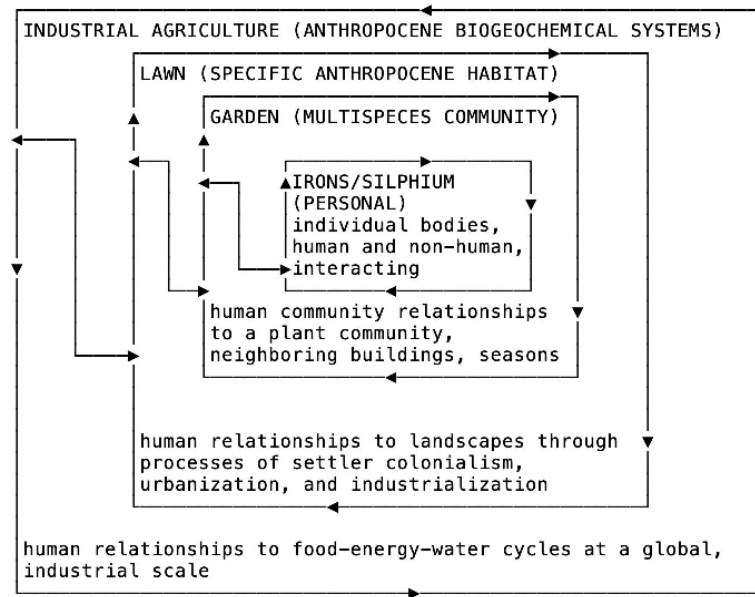


Figure 7. A framework depicting the nested and cross-scalar relationships in experimental gardening projects. Visualization by Ellie Irons.

Each scale level includes a title specific to our analysis of “Un-Lawning with Silphium” (IRONS/SILPHIUM; GARDEN; LAWN; INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE), a more general category (PERSONAL; MULTISPECIES COMMUNITY; SPECIFIC ANTHROPOCENE HABITAT; ANTHROPOCENE BIOGEOCHEMICAL SYSTEMS), and a series of descriptive phrases that elaborate on the human relationships featured in our analysis.

Civic science gardening with silphium, and other gardening experiments in the Anthropocene, can guide public sensory engagements with scale, help spark recognition and investigation of contradictory scale effects, and motivate us to imagine relationships of caring responsibility. We offer a framework (Figure 7) to visualize and support experimental engagement with nested and cross-scalar relationships in gardening projects. Each scale level is described using terms specific to our analysis along with a general categorization to invite other projects to self-reflect on their own work. Storytelling prompts can emerge from these categories:

- What kind of multispecies community is your experiment enmeshed in? What multispecies players inhabit a lab, a greenhouse, or a biological field station?
- What specific Anthropocene habitats—those ecological arrangements that didn’t exist hundreds or thousands of years ago, and might disappear soon—is your project embedded in? The international research university, an eroding shoreline, a botanical garden gathering atypical varieties of plant biodiversity?
- What Anthropocene-impacted global biogeochemical systems is your project embedded in and reliant upon? What different or similar kinds of future relationships can you imagine with these systems?

While scales in the framework are rendered as discrete frames with neat, two-way flows of impact, the process of scale framing is inevitably about simplification and reduction, which is messy. Much like an experimental garden plot, some variables have to be removed to sense others more clearly. What doesn’t fit within any given scale, or the contradictions and tensions that arise when moving between scales, are key to sensing

the limits of the framework. Further questions for self-reflection emerge. How do different frames of reference highlight and exclude varied aspects of reality? And how should we respond when those varied aspects are in tension or contradict one and other?

Finally, the missing but omnipresent axis in our framework is time. As Irons notes in her silphium story, the land the silphium roots in has had and will have many names, as does silphium itself, in this plant species' myriad relationships with different human cultures across time and space. This epoch of land theft and enclosure, of soil being owned and plants rooted in private property, is deeply entangled with the other realities represented in the figure, across scales. As white women educated in interdisciplinary research working with plants and land, this contradiction is not lost on us. Our access to land in North America for cultivation and experimentation is predicated on Indigenous dispossession, even as we work to practice and experiment with forms of perennial plant-human relationships to build the potential for responsibility.

Because "responsibility cannot simply be upscaled" (Dürbeck and Hübkes 7), looking forward, we seek to design and steward gardening projects that guide sensory engagements with the contradictions of scale in order to generate practical possibilities for learning and change. We call for fellow experimental gardening researchers and practitioners to join us in investigating how to evolve our methods and relationships in order to participate in a more deeply contextualized, "down-scaling" of the Anthropocene concept (Biermann et al. 348).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all civic scientists, past and present, for their generous and valuable contributions to realizing experimental civic science projects with silphium and for their willingness to learn together in community. The authors thank colleagues at The Land Institute for ongoing research collaborations with silphium, with particular thanks to David Van Tassel for his leadership of the silphium domestication program and Lydia Nicholson for the illustration she developed for this article. Finally, the authors would like to recognize the Sanctuary for Independent Media, whose environmental campus surrounds the parcel of lawn where the silphium plants Irons tends are rooted, and whose ongoing land stewardship creates conditions for experimenting with gardening against the Anthropocene.

Submission received 15 July 2023

Revised version accepted 21 February 2023

Works Cited

Biermann, Frank, et al. "Down to Earth: Contextualizing the Anthropocene." *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 39, 2016, pp. 341-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.11.004>

Bonney, et. al. "Public Participation in Scientific Research: Defining the Field and Assessing Its Potential for Informal Science Education. A CAISE Inquiry Group Report." Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE), 1 July 2009. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519688.pdf>

- Buizer, Marleen, et al. "Governance, Scale, and the Environment: The Importance of Recognizing Knowledge Claims in Transdisciplinary Areas." *Ecology and Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, article 21, 2011. <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art21/>
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Cooper, Caren B., et al. "Inclusion in Citizen Science: The Conundrum of Rebranding." *Science*, vol. 372, no. 6549, 2021, pp. 1386–1388. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abi6487>
- Davis, Heather, and Zoe Todd. "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2017, pp. 761–80.
- Dürbeck, Gabriele, and Philip Hübkes. "The Anthropocene as an Age of Scalar Complexity: Introduction." *Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene: Imagining Human Responsibility in an Age of Scalar Complexity*, edited by Gabriele Dürbeck and Philip Hübkes, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003136989>
- Hanna, Alex, and Tina M. Park. "Against Scale: Provocations and Resistances to Scale Thinking." *arXiv [cs.CY]*, 2020, <http://arxiv.org/abs/2010.08850>.
- Irons, Ellie. "The Next Epoch Seed Library's Lawn Lab: A Public Experiment in Collaboration with Seeds, Time, and Weeds." *Media+Environment* vol. 2, no. 1, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.13470>
- Irons, Ellie. "Practicing Plant-Human Solidarity: Critical Ecosocial Art, Phytocentric Pedagogy, and the Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory." Electronic thesis, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, 2021. <https://dspace.rpi.edu/handle/20.500.13015/6135>
- Irons, Ellie. "Un-Lawning with Silphium." December 2021. <https://ellieirons.com/silphium/>.
- Legrand, Marine, and Frédérique Chlous. "Citizen Science, Participatory Research, and Naturalistic Knowledge Production: Opening Spaces for Epistemic Plurality (an Interdisciplinary Comparative Workshop in France at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle ['National Museum of Natural History'])." *Environmental Development*, vol. 20, 2016, pp. 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2016.10.002>
- Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- Moore, Jason W., editor. *Anthropocene Or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. PM Press, 2016.
- Myers, Natasha. "How to Grow Liveable Worlds: Ten (Not-so-Easy) Steps for Life in the Planthropocene." ABC Religion & Ethics, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 28 Jan. 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2023.
- Paperson, La. "A Ghetto Land Pedagogy: An Antidote for Settler Environmentalism." *Environmental Education Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 115–30. Taylor and Francis+NEJM, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.865115>.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Raduski, Andrew R., et al. "Patterns of Genetic Variation in a Prairie Wildflower, *Silphium integrifolium*, Suggest a Non-Prairie Origin and Locally Adaptive Variation." *American*

- Journal of Botany*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2021, pp. 145-158. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajb2.1603>
- Shirk, Jennifer. "Coming to Terms: Building a Better Vocabulary for Work in (and about) This Field." *CitizenScience.org*, 5 May 2022, <https://citizenscience.org/2022/05/05/coming-to-terms/>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2023.
- Smith, Huron H. *Ethnobotany of the Meskwaki Indians*. Bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee, vol. 4, pp. 175-326. Accessed through the *Native American Ethnobotany Database*, 2003, <http://naeb.brit.org>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2023.
- "Silphium Integrifolium Michx." *USDA Plants Database*, <https://plants.usda.gov/home/plantProfile?symbol=SIIN2>. Accessed 15 July 2022.
- Streit Krug, Aubrey. "Ecospheric Care Work." *The Ecological Citizen*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2020, pp. 143-148. <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/article.php?t=ecospheric-care-work>
- The Land Institute. "Civic Science." The Land Institute, 27 Sept. 2022, <http://landinstitute.org/civic-science>.
- US EPA. *Hudson River Cleanup*. 2017, <https://www.epa.gov/hudsonriverpcbs/hudson-river-cleanup>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2023.
- Van Tassel, David, et al. "New Food Crop Domestication in the Age of Gene Editing: Genetic, Agronomic and Cultural Change Remain Co-evolutionarily Entangled." *Frontiers in Plant Science*, vol. 11, article 789, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpls.2020.00789>
- Whittier, Casey, Anna Andersson, and Aubrey Streit Krug. "Sensing Silphium." *The New Farmer's Almanac: Adjustments and Accommodations*, vol. 6, Greenhorns, 2023, pp. 120-123.
- Woods, Derek. "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene." *Minnesota Review*, vol. 2014, no. 83, 2014, pp. 133-142. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-2782327>

Gardening the Symbiocene: Andrea Zanzotto's and Daria Menicanti's Poetic Hospitality

Serena Ferrando
Arizona State University, USA
serena.ferrando@asu.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4828>



Abstract

This essay explores the weaving together of vegetal and elemental narratives through the poetry of Andrea Zanzotto and Daria Menicanti and shows how their experience of the landscape is punctuated by cross-species encounters, a radical openness to the world, the belief in the common roots of all life, and the embrace of vulnerability in interactions with others. Starting from the premise that these poets comprehend that an emphasis on verballity reflects the anthropic desire to translate life into a one-species code and constitutes an impediment to universal and meaningful communication, this essay argues that Zanzotto's and Menicanti's embrace of the nonverballity of plant communication becomes key in the process of meaning-making. A narration of and with plants is the antidote to what they understand as the ultimate malady of language that prevents it from grasping and conveying the richness of the world after it has supplanted the nonhuman domain. Through a close reading of four poems that illustrates how the poets embrace the eloquent silences, gaps, hesitations, and overabundance of meaning of the vegetal realm, this essay foregrounds the boundary-breaking quality of Zanzotto's and Menicanti's poetry as a space for rich human-nonhuman exchanges. Ultimately, this essay argues that by declining to place themselves above plants and exert power over them, Zanzotto and Menicanti usher in the Symbiocene, the era characterized by multispecies coexistence, mutual support, and interdependence. Their poetry creates spaces where the human can lean into the more-than-human and, for one brief instant, get a taste of existing in harmony with the life that pulsates all around.

Keywords: Poetry, Zanzotto, Menicanti, vegetal, Symbiocene.

Resumen

Este ensayo explora el entrettejido de las narrativas vegetal y elemental a través de la poesía de Andrea Zanzotto y Daria Menicanti, y muestra cómo los encuentros inesperados con diferentes especies, una actitud receptiva radical del mundo, la creencia en las raíces comunes de todas las formas de vida, y la aceptación de la vulnerabilidad en las interacciones con otros puntualizan sus experiencias del paisaje. Partiendo de la premisa de que estos poetas comprenden que un énfasis en la verbalidad refleja el deseo antrópico de traducir la vida a un código de especie y constituye un impedimento para una comunicación universal y significativa, este ensayo sostiene que la actitud receptiva de la ausencia de verbalidad de la comunicación con las plantas se convierte en clave en el proceso de construcción de significados. Una narración de y con plantas es el antídoto para lo que ellos entienden como la enfermedad suprema del lenguaje, la cual le impide captar y transmitir la riqueza del mundo después de que haya suplantado el dominio no humano. A través de una lectura atenta de cuatro poemas que ilustran cómo los poetas aceptan los elocuentes silencios, intervalos, titubeos y la sobreabundancia de significado del reino vegetal, este ensayo pone de relieve la cualidad innovadora de la poesía de Zanzotto y Menicanti como un espacio para intercambios fructuosos entre humanos y no humanos. Finalmente, este ensayo sostiene que al rechazar situarse por encima de las plantas y ejercer poder sobre ellas, Zanzotto y Menicanti introducen el Simbioceno, la era caracterizada por la coexistencia de las múltiples especies, el apoyo mutuo, y la

interdependencia. Su poesía crea espacios donde lo humano puede acercarse a lo más-que-humano y, por un breve instante, saborear la experiencia de existir en armonía con la vida que late a nuestro alrededor.

Palabras clave: Poesía, Zanzotto, Menicanti, vegetal, Simbioceno.

The UN declared 2020 the International Year of Plant Health and brought together plant advocates from across the globe to engage with the most pressing issues concerning the vegetal world.¹ In the humanities, the current environmental emergency has sprouted ways of writing and studying literature that transcend human dimensions and pull us toward new modes of encountering the nonhuman. An example is Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's *Through Vegetal Being. Two Philosophical Perspectives*, which designates plants and natural environments as the gateway to "changing our way of perceiving" other living beings and forging a path of coexistence "with all the elements of the environment without aiming at dominating them" (48). Another example is Emanuele Coccia's *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, whose goal is to define a new cosmology founded on the life of plants (33). Steeped in silence and yet powerfully eloquent (not unlike poetry), gardens' vegetal narratives model for us bridge-building and cohabitation behaviors that do not preclude the preservation of separate roots and individual bodies. However, cultivating the ability to tune into such narratives can awaken "in us a wording foreign to our traditional logos and predictive logic" and "reopen the cultural horizon within which we have been trapped" (Irigaray, "What the Vegetal" 135). This essay explores how the literary strategies of the widely acclaimed Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto (1921-2011) and the lesser-known poet Daria Menicanti (1914-1995) employ vegetal and elemental narratives that, to adopt Walter Benjamin's stance, resist translation into the language of humans and stage encounters among living beings that offer a new way forward (73). Subtly critical of anthropogenic ills, the poets' images of vegetal existences and green spaces create what Giampaolo Piccari defines as "ample spaces of syntony," where human/nonhuman oppositions are resolved in the tension toward a more-than-human dimension (445). For this reason, I use Glenn Albrecht's term Symbiocene to describe Zanzotto's and Menicanti's poetic portrayals of human-vegetal companionship, since it befits the poets' understanding of the "interconnectedness" and "mutual interdependence" between all species and life forms (13, 14). While the term Anthropocene places a distance between human and nonhuman, Symbiocene focuses on nearness. It highlights the proximity of people to animal, vegetal, and mineral life without drawing boundaries between them, recognizing that they are equal agents in the same symbiotic system that is based on collaboration rather than competition.

In *La vita delle piante*, Coccia envisions a world where "everything [...] is fluid, everything [...] is in motion, with, against or in the subject" and where being-in-the-world means the absence of any "material distinction between us and the rest of the world" (45,

¹ <http://www.fao.org/plant-health-2020/home/en/>.

46).² In this physical and metaphysical environment, permeability is the ruling principle that presupposes that “everything is in everything,” that the world and the subject interpenetrate each other, and that the realities of matter and of the living meet in this fluid environment (Coccia 46, 44). In this world of “immersion” where nothing is fixed, neither the subject nor the object, I am interested in what type of language or communication can exist and what forms, if any, they could take. According to Coccia, the experience of listening to music is an example of this type of communication, since it provides an amalgamation of ourselves with the universe, where soundwaves and sensitivity “perfectly amalgam with each other” (47). This type of communication, then, based on a “relation between a living being and the world [that] can never be reduced to one of opposition (or objectification),” would have to transcend the traditional tenet of language that presupposes an interlocutor and, most commonly, an “other” or a subject and an object (Coccia 47). The poetry of Zanzotto and Menicanti provides examples of this intra-mingling that Coccia calls *mescolanza* or “mixture.” Zanzotto does so stylistically and idiomatically, while Menicanti—not one to experiment—does so thematically and philosophically. Both, however, converge in a vision of overlaps, cohabitation, and entanglements. This essay is a foray into these poets’ vegetal narratives, in which I isolate salient instances from their work and share some reflections on poetry, language, and vegetal life that emerge from them.

For context, I will begin by providing some brief bio-bibliographical notes on Menicanti and Zanzotto. They were contemporaries, and although their work is extremely different, their portrayals of vegetal life offer surprising points of contact. Daria Menicanti (1914-1995) published six collections of poetry during her lifetime, and an additional one appeared posthumously. She was an exquisite poet but is, unfortunately, relatively unknown both in Italy and abroad, even though her work almost perfectly responds to today’s posthumanist calls and for this reason alone would deserve more visibility. As we will see, Menicanti’s work manifests a tendency toward transversality and interdependence and against binary oppositions and the boundaries between species and habitats. Andrea Zanzotto (1921-2011) is extremely well established in the literary canon. Many critics, in fact, consider him the foremost modern Italian poet since Nobel Laureate Eugenio Montale (1896-1981). Zanzotto’s corpus includes fourteen books of poetry and several prose works. Both he and Menicanti were deeply rooted in their respective lands, and their work contains many localized references: Menicanti’s setting is preeminently Milan while Zanzotto’s is Conegliano and Pieve di Soligo, in the Northern Italian region of Veneto. Through the years, Zanzotto’s work became progressively experimental, almost flamboyant in the poet’s quest for ways to exceed and explode the borders of language via the inclusion of special spacing, signs, symbols, drawings, and sounds. Menicanti’s poetry, by contrast, was always poised, classical, epigrammatic, and stylistically contained. As much as Zanzotto tends to build his poems by accumulation, almost hoarding as much information as possible until it completely breaks down, so Menicanti is lapidary. But both poets embody the essence of poetry as described by philosopher Massimo Cacciari in the

² All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

introductory essay to the volume "A foglia ed a gemma." *Lecture dall'opera poetica di Andrea Zanzotto*. Cacciari observes that Zanzotto's poetry (and all poetry, I would add) "works tirelessly to reassemble what has been shattered" and "traces the finger along the margins of wounds, marks them [...] presses on them as on the *brutally* correct note" (14). Taking Cacciari's observation as a starting point, I explore how these two Italian poets strive to "inhabit" the world "poetically," or to find, in Cacciari's words, "the concordance, the destined harmony, [and] the conversation" in the world (14).

In "What the Vegetal World Says to Us," Irigaray pairs the modern neglect of the vegetal world with a progressive removal of humans "from our life": "If our Western history has gradually neglected the importance of the vegetal world, it likewise forgot what 'to be' means. It assimilated this word to an idea extrapolated from any existence [...] removed us from our life" (134). Zanzotto and Menicanti take us back to our life by making the vegetal world prominent and showing the deep and complex entanglements of bodies, language, and earth. Zanzotto plunges us into the landscape with a disorienting, overwhelming poetic experience that is meant to capture the entirety of the life of the territory and its vegetal presence, which overflows the limits of human language. He therefore resorts to an idiom that adheres to the land but that is also constantly frustrated by its inability to transcend the limitations of being word-based and human-based. Let us consider three examples in which Zanzotto's language takes on vegetal qualities in an attempt to break beyond this barrier.

HIGH, OTHER LANGUAGE,
BEYOND IDIOM?
Tongues *blossom* beguile
run wild and betray in a thousand
needles of muteness and deafness
they *sink* and are *sharpened* in so very many idiots
Tongues amidst whose *abysses in vain*
we believe we pass--*blooming, blooming*, in the highest
flavors and smells, but they are *idiocy*
Idiom, none other, is *what runs through me*
in *persecutions and panting h j k ch ch ch*
idiom
is that *ossified* gesture
that accumulates
evenings *snipped away toward nothingness*
[...]
And I drag myself there, to the *untranslatable why*
beyond-idiom
[...]
But yes, on the other hand, *some*
small poem, that doesn't want anything to do with it
yet lives and dies in idioms--I do care about that
and about the piece of paper
carried off forever from the windy
darkness of a *Piave Valley*
truly definitely
Canadian or Australian
or *other-worldly*. (*Tutte le poesie* 768-769)³

³ Translated by John P. Welle and Ruth Feldman. Emphasis mine.

The poem desperately clings to the earth as a steppingstone for the “other-wordly” (“aldilà”) in the closing line and ping-pongs between the urge to skip over the “abysses” (“baratri”) that separate us from the fullness of the life of the universe and the impossibility of doing so that is intrinsic to our human nature and our human language. The blooming landscape then turns into an insurmountable wall against which the idiom becomes idiocy: “Tongues amid whose abysses in vain / we believe we pass – blooming, blooming, in the highest / flavors and smells, but they are idiocy” (“Lingue tra i cui baratri invano / si crede di passare – fioriti, fioriti, in altissimi / sapori e odori, ma sono idiozia”). We witness the breakdown of language into a string of isolated consonants “h jk ch ch ch” in the painful attempt to tear the veil with metaphorical scissors, but in vain, since the veil retreats (“snipped away toward nothingness,” “sforbicate via verso il niente”). The poet drags himself to the place of the “untranslatable” that lies “beyond-idiom” where his language breaks down (“intraducibile perché / fuori-idioma”).⁴ The poem ends with an apparent declaration of faith in the humble power of poetry (“some small poems,” “qualche piccola poesia”) to cross the borders of human existence (“Piave Valley... Canadian or Australian or other-wordly,” “ValPiave ... canadese o Australiana o aldilà”). This faith is, however, undermined by the ambiguous use of the preposition “da” four lines up, where “rapinato dall’oscurità” (“carried off from the darkness”) may mean both “rescued from the darkness” and “robbed by the darkness.”

Another poem, “Grasses and Manes, Winters” (“Erbe e Manes, Inverni,” from *Meteo*, published in 1996), seems arranged on the page in the shape of adjacent fields, as noted by Luca Bragaja, to mimic the “spatial self-expression of plants” (172; Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being* 113). I am sharing the poem in its entirety so that you may see its structure, but I will only refer to a portion of it.

Grasses and Manes, Winters
Pity for *finites and infinites*,
memories
perhaps twisting, twisted
but everywhere everywhere
arisen independently
by your intrinsic oblivions,
grasses amid grasses, Manes, our evenings...
Iridium filings, crushed quartz
in winter’s infused darkness,

“ALTO, ALTRO LINGUAGGIO, / FUORI IDIOMA?

Lingue fioriscono affasciano / inselvano e tradiscono in mille / aghi di mutismi e sordità / sprofondano e aguzzano in tanti e tantissimi idioti / Lingue tra i cui baratri invano / si crede passare--fioriti, fioriti, in altissimi / sapori e odori, ma sono idiozia / Idioma, non altro, è ciò che mi attraversa / in persecuzioni e aneliti h jk ch ch ch / idioma / è quel gesto ingessato / che accumula / sere sforbicate via verso il niente [...] E là mi trascino, all’intraducibile perché / fuori-idioma [...] Ma sì, invece, di qualche / piccola poesia, che non vorrebbe saperne / ma pur vive e muore in essi--di ciò m’interessa / e del foglio di carta / per sempre rapinato dall’oscurità / ventosa di una ValPiave / davvero definitivamente / canadese o australiana / o aldilà.”

⁴ Danilo Mainardi draws attention to the “semantic impotence” (“impotenza semantica”) of a language that only aims to describe human life and that for this reason cannot “overcome the borders between species” (“valicare il confine di specie”) (112).

precipitous acumens
made fatuous by violet
and yet always carried to you
to grasses, grasses-Manes...
Trifling Tiny Manes
whistlings perhaps chilly
chirping of *elf-threads*
in mild supplication
poa pratensis, *poa silvestris*--
shrunk motility and
low frequencies of the green: here
it already gathers spurring spurring
even in vast befogged *fields*
consoled to violet
consolations you dislodge from violet
O there, away through the narrow and trash
poa pratensis, Manes, *poa silvestris*,
would you care for the no longer seamless
garment
of the world would you nurture
the uprooted? Ttsch, sst, zzt
Would you save them?
[*poa pratensis*, *poa silvestris*: the most common grass.] (*Tutte le poesie* 823-824)⁵

The structure of the poem—very open, embracing the empty space of the page, but also very fragmented—matches the break-down of the poet's language as it opens to the more-than-human realm represented by the grass ("erbe"). Throughout the poem, like a refrain, the words "*poa pratensis*, *poa silvestris*," which are Latin for the most common grass, paint the scene in the green and purple hues of the fields ("prati"). Bragaja remarks how the repetition of the syllable "ve" in the last five lines of the poem ("*silvestris* ... *veste* ... *divelto* ... *provvedereste* ... *salvereste*") "propagates utopianly the sounds of the 'green,'" which, in Italian, is "verde" (182). Bragaja also remarks how we can almost hear the blades of grass rustling in the alliterations "finiti e infiniti," "fatti fatui," and "elfi-fili." Emerging directly from the ground, Zanzotto's word-sounds seem to substitute themselves for his language and give the impression of a poem sprouted and living from the land.

⁵ Translated by Patrick Barron. Emphasis mine.

"Erbe e Manes, Inverni

Pietà per finiti e infiniti, / memorie / forse distorcenti, distorte / ma che ovunque ovunque / da voi stesse crescete / e dai vostri intrinseci oblii / erbe ed erbe, Manes, nostre sere... / Limature d'iridio, fratti quarzi / nel cupo che invero insuffla, / rapidi acumi / fatti fatui dal viola / ma pure sempre arrivati da voi stessi / ad erbe, erbe-Manes... / Frivoli Pargoli Manes / zirlìi forse geliferi / grillii d'elfi-fili / in supplicità mite / *poa pratensis*, *poa silvestris*-- / rattratte motilità e / basse frequenze del verde: ecco / già vi si aduna spronando spronando / sì che in lati obnubilati prati / consolate al viola / consolazioni sottraete al viola / O là, via per le strette e trash, / *poa pratensis*, Manes, *poa silvestris*, / alla non più inconsutile veste / del mondo al *divelto* / *provvedereste?* Ttsch, sst, zzt / *Salvereste?* / / *poa pratensis*, *poa silvestris*: le più comuni erbe."

Coccia describes the breathing of plants as a cycle of acceptance and alteration, through which, by taking in CO₂ and releasing oxygen into the air, they constantly mold the material world they inhabit (23). Analogously, in Zanzotto's poetry, the more language is used and disintegrated—typically by contradictoriness and polysemy—the more room is freed for meaningful communication. In fact, language and communication in his poetry are almost contradictory terms, so much so that destroying one opens the door for the other. I will not discuss here any of Zanzotto's work written in the Venetian dialect, but I must note that dialect—rather than Italian—provides Zanzotto with more opportunities to adhere to the earth because, as he writes in the notes accompanying his collection *Filò* (1988), the dialect is “viscous” and “poured into the earth” (“viscoso” and “riversato entro la terra”) (Zanzotto, *Tutte* 508, 509). The dialect is, he writes, “connected/unconnected” (“connesso/sconnesso”) and represents the “vague land in which [...] every territoriality fades into the adjacent ones” (“terreno vago in cui [...] ogni territorialità sfuma in quelle contigue”) (*Tutte* 509). The dialect is difficult to bridle because it contains a desire to “tear the margins, go far, ‘run astray” (“stracciare i margini, di andar lontano, di ‘correre fuori strada”) (*Tutte* 506). Zanzotto admires it because it inhabits a liminal space between language and life that the poet strives to capture on the page. Moreover, the orality of the dialect protects it from becoming static and endows it with what Zanzotto calls a “pulviscular-fluid-interreticular nature” (“natura pulviscolare-fluida-interreticolare”) and “the most radiant aperture onto alterity” (“la più smagliante apertura su alterità”) (*Tutte* 510). Zanzotto's poetic idiom, which becomes progressively difficult and intricate with each book, emulates and incorporates—among other things—the Venetian dialect's vitality and “absolute freedom” (“assoluta libertà”) to break the rules of institutionalized language while staying rooted in a place (*Tutte* 506). Zanzotto's definition of idiom, which is the title of his 1986 collection (*Idioma*), is a container of two opposites: a fullness, like a blooming, and a closure, synonymous with idiocy, that he calls “closure-privation-deprivation” (*Tutte* 777). This idiom/idiocy, mentioned in the first poem I analyzed, is described by Bragaja as a “unitary organism [...] nevertheless incessantly subjected to fragmentation” (173). Rooted in the landscape, Zanzotto's poetic language makes itself available to contamination and crosspollination in order to lose itself. To use Coccia's words, it is a language that works against itself to welcome the other (129). It is this full abandonment to the intermingling of places, bodies, and *logos* that animates Zanzotto's poetry and creates a space for new forms of discovery and communication.

Niva Lorenzini's brief but poignant study of Zanzotto's poetry, *Dire il silenzio: la poesia di Andrea Zanzotto*, circles back several times to the extreme stratification of the poet's language, “tirelessly stretching toward the roots, the traces of the lost origin” (“infaticabilmente proteso verso le radici, le tracce smarrite dell'origine”) as he strives to repair the break that separates him from the earth and that lies at the origin of his sense of nature's unknowability (65). The bipartite poem, “There's no telling how much green” (“Non si sa quanto verde,” also from *Meteo*), describes Zanzotto's frustrated attempts to invent a lexicon beyond language that is as richly stratified and—oxymoronically—as eloquently silent as the layers of green in the field that he is contemplating (“this green,”

“questo verde”).⁶ I quote here the entire first section of the poem and relevant portions of the longer second section.

I
There's no telling how much green
is buried *under* this green
nor how much rain *under* this rain
many are the infinities
that here converge
that from here wander off
oblivious, stupefied
There's-no-telling This is the relict
of that rainy relict
the green in which the extreme of the green
is weaving
Perhaps *there's-no-telling* for a
deaf movement of light distilling
itself in an ephemeral sound, and knowing
Perhaps allowing blooming, extending
combining / member to member, rejoining.

II
How much green sleeps
under this green
and how much nihil *under*
this richest nihil?
You escape, ah, from names
yet having perhaps a name
and yet knowing something of it?
But *who knows* how much rain
sleeps *under* this most delicate
superconfident rain
who knows how much luster
[...]
“Here where I thought of thinking
and of grasping and unbalancing
[...] (*Tutte le poesie* 791-792)⁷

The poem opens with Zanzotto's admission of his own limitations before a nature that Lorenzini has described as “unachievable” (“inarrivabile”) (40). The line “there is no telling” is repeated, in a slightly irregular anaphorical pattern, as if to underline not only nature's ultimate unknowability but also its consequent “unsayability.”⁸ The phrase is accompanied by five repetitions of the preposition “under” (“sotto”) that point to the

⁶ Zanzotto defined himself as “il botanico delle grammatiche” (“the botanist of grammars”) (*Logos Zanzotto*). The quote is at the 15'15" mark.

⁷ Translated by Patrick Barron. Emphasis mine.

“I / Non si sa quanto verde / sia sepolto sotto questo verde / né quanta pioggia sotto questa pioggia / molti sono gli infiniti / che qui convergono / che di qui s'allontanano / dimentichi, intontiti / Non-si-sa Questo è il relitto / di tale relitto piovoso / il verde in cui sta reticendo / l'estremo del verde / Forse non-si-sa per un / sordo movimento di luce si / distilla in un suono effimero, e sa / Forse si lascia sfiorare, si sporge, / congiunge / membra a membra, ritorce. / II / Quanto mai verde dorme / sotto questo verde / e quanto nihil sotto / questo ricchissimo nihil? / Ti sottrai, ahi, ai nomi / pur avendo forse un nome / e pur sapendone qualcosa? / Ma chissà quanta pioggia / dorme sotto questa debolissima / sovraconfidente pioggia / chissà quanto lustro [...] ‘Qui dove pensai di pensare / e di afferrare e sbilanciare [...]’

⁸ Note Lorenzini's excellent description of the “unsayable underlying truth” (“indicibile verità sottostante”) in Zanzotto's poetry (21).

stratification of land and language and the poet's urge to dig into the earth in search of meaning ("the infinities," "the relict," "gli infiniti," "relitto") (Lorenzini 2014, 38).⁹ Zanzotto's mission to penetrate a deeply restrained ("weaving," "reticendo") landscape ("You escape, ah, from names / yet having perhaps a name," "Ti sottrai, ahi, ai nomi / pur avendo forse un nome") feeds his efforts to found a language that "can locate itself outside particular languages (*beyond idiom*)" ("riesca a collocarsi fuori dei linguaggi particolari (*fuori idioma*)") and imitate the knottedness and intricateness of plant bodies (Lorenzini 17). The impenetrable green web of vegetal life into which Zanzotto pours himself and whose texture, vitality, and reserve he tries to approximate through the imperfect and tragically limited language at his disposal exhibits an inaccessibility and a vulnerability typical of nonhuman life. The rich, thick, and seemingly impenetrable structure into which plants grow to protect themselves against their natural and unnatural enemies crosses over into Zanzotto's texts, making them look similarly exposed, frail, and dense. *Rinselvaticimento* (becoming wild again) is an Italian term that describes well Zanzotto's poetic participation in the secret life of vegetables and his tension to emulate its more-than-verbal communication modes. As the landscape "achieves an unreachable, impenetrable muteness" ("raggiunge una mutezza irraggiungibile, impenetrabile") so does Zanzotto's poem as it stretches past its word-based potential into a more-than-language (Lorenzini 48). While the poet's diction, phrasing, and idiom go out of balance and begin to unravel into vegetal-like muteness ("I thought of thinking / and of grasping and unbalancing"; "pensai di pensare / e di afferrare e sbilanciare"), the distance between Zanzotto and the layers of green in the poem shrinks.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, per Lorenzini's acute observation, the ultimate outcome of a verbalization that has reached its own limits is a resounding silence reverberating with multiple, inexpressible, meanings (25, 48).¹¹

In two vivid essays on the topic of green imagery in Zanzotto, Costanza Lunardi describes the "symbiotic communion" ("comunione simbiotica") between the poet and the landscape and the transfer of "wildness" ("selvatichezza") from plants to text visible in the residual traces of green that it contains ("Nel Kēpos" 309).¹² She also notes that wildflowers embody a so-called "botany of trespassing" ("botanica dello sconfinamento"), namely a disregard for human-set boundaries because they evade control and refuse to be contained ("Genius loci" 112). She observes how this phytological term applies to Zanzotto's poems, which—like wildflowers—heroically exist beyond imposed restraints and become prime vessels for an extraordinary display of the more-than-human ("a landscape beyond humanity," "un paesaggio al di là dell'uomo") ("Nel Kēpos" 314). The

⁹ According to Karen L. F. Houle, human language excludes or prevents knowing the world in its totality because it relegates difference to a deviation from a human standard (168).

¹⁰ Zanzotto described his goal as "restoring poetry's task" ("riabilitare la poesia al suo compito") of uncovering the truth, especially after WWII (*Logos Zanzotto*). The quote is at the 26'34" mark.

¹¹ In a letter to Lorenzini Zanzotto uses the words "frastuono e silenzio terminale" ("chaos and terminal silence") (95).

¹² Analogously, Marder argues that "we must leave plenty of room for the untranslatable" when embracing "the language of plants [...] into the more or less familiar frameworks of human discourse" ("To Hear Plants Speak" XXIV). The editors of *The Language of Plants* also recommend the adoption of a language that "implies our attunement to a speaking without words" (XX).

images of precariousness and linguistic instability in this poem (“There’s no telling,” “perhaps,” “who knows,” “Non si sa,” “forse,” “chissà”) also reflect the unsteadiness of a poetic operation adventurously leaping toward “the roots, the lost traces of the origin” (“le radici, le tracce smarrite dell’origine”) (Lorenzini 65).

The mirroring of the corporeal and elemental plantness in the three poems analyzed here makes the traditionally “anthropocentric turf” of poetry a “porous interface” between the verbal and the nonverbal, where what the editors of *The Language of Plants* call the “surplus of meaning” possessed but not signified verbally by vegetal life can emerge—at least partially (2019, 123, XXV).¹³ By both anthropomorphizing the landscape and vegetalizing the human, Zanzotto cracks open the quintessentially human medium of language so that it morphs, in part, into an intrahuman tool that can “grow outward [...] with nonhuman others” (Ryan 275, *Through Vegetal Being* 174).¹⁴ With this operation of recalling and reaffirming vegetal life, meanings multiply and words liquify, overflow, and transhumanize into a poetic space where the tenuous chance of ultimate knowledge is, to borrow Pia Pera’s phrase, “almost palpable in its elusiveness” (“quasi palpabile nella sua inafferrabilità”) (87).

In Menicanti, the invitation to open up to the nonhuman is much more composed and understated than in Zanzotto although the message is equally powerful. As she once stated, writing poetry today means “uscire dai limiti” or exceeding the limits (*Il canto del grillo* 767). In a poem titled “Divertissement (Itinerari coniugali),” Menicanti declared, “I would like to farm the land [...] because bucolic was my heart” (“Vorrei coltivare la terra [...] perché bucolico era il mio cuore”), and her complete adherence to the earth infuses her body of work (*La vita è un dito* 338). In the poem “The Word” (“La parola”), from the collection *Ferragosto*, where she gives a rare declaration of poetics, Menicanti compares words to plant bulbs picked from the earth (“ogni parola come un bulbo vecchio / levato dalla sua casa di terra”). I will only refer to some sections of this poem, which is surprisingly long by Menicanti’s standards.

The Word
Every word by itself
is *scream comfort cry* or perhaps
just *sound and nonsense*.
But it is not that it can survive alone
for long
[...]
words are facts –
believe me – they are the *thing*.
[...]
in the chaos of times *endless*
significances
have *clumped* themselves onto its *hungry* heart.
Peeling patiently
each word like an *old bulb*
taken from its earthy home

¹³ This statement is reprised by Marder: “Plants, as well as all other living beings, live in excess of the value systems we thrust upon them” (“To Hear Plants Speak” 114).

¹⁴ Lunardi argues that the differences between species fade when Zanzotto assigns anthropomorphic traits to plants (“Connotando la pianta di una valenza antropomorfica, quasi ad annullare la diversità”) (“Nel Kēpos” 307).

you will find in the middle, the *uncorrupt*
beginning, the *true and only*
preface to a future life
to the growing-with to its *combining*
with the *always other* with the *always*
new—and the attempt at everlasting (*La vita è un dito* 402)¹⁵

The old “bulbous” word plucked from its home in the ground, which I will call “bulb-word,” contains “the uncorrupt beginning, the true and single preface / to a future life / to the growing-with to its combining / with the always other with the always / new – and the attempt at everlasting” (“nel centro l’incorrotto / avvio, la vera prefazione / individua a una vita futura / al concregere al suo combinarsi / con sempre altro col sempre / nuovo – e il tentato eterno”). Discourse and matter in this poem are intimately intertwined in the deeply material (vegetal and mineral) nature of the word, tied in a process of exchange and com-penetration or, to use Coccia’s terminology, “immersion” or *mescolanza*, “mixture” (53). Scholars of material ecocriticism have theorized the “complex interrelations between discourse and matter” that we find in Menicanti’s and Zanzotto’s work. For example, Serpil Opperman and Serenella Iovino describe discourse as “always co-extensive with the material world” (467). The vegetal imagery that we find in Menicanti’s poem reveals the discursive and material correspondences and contaminations where, in Coccia’s words, “the biological and the cultural, the material and the cultural, logos and extension” become indistinguishable (133). According to Iovino, permeability and porosity are key features of this world where “there are not clear-cut boundaries” but “an ongoing morphing process that involves organisms, structures, genes, languages, or ideas” (103, 102). In Menicanti’s poetic world, to use Opperman’s and Iovino’s phrase, “humans, nonhumans, and their stories are tied together” (5). Menicanti’s bulb-words—vibrant discourse-matter agglomerates extracted from the ground—belong to what Jane Bennett views as the web of connections formed by the materiality between human and nonhuman (17). In this poem, the past participle “attempted” (“tentato”) in the concluding line underlines the limitations inherent in our human finitude, which poetry constantly strives to transcend and does indeed transcend only on very rare occasions when the veil between us and the “other” or the “beyond” is lifted for one extremely short instant before closing again. Menicanti’s choice of the word *sfogliando*, whose prefix *s-* signifies a subtraction, hints at our human inability to capture the wholeness of life.¹⁶ The same idea of removal is reprised two lines later in the past participle “taken” (“levato”). Utilized as language, the bulb-word’s “uncorrupt” (“incorrotto”) content-meaning, detached from its material housing, loses its wholeness

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

“La parola

Ogni parola a sé è grido conforto pianto o forse / soltanto suono e nonsense. / Ma non è che da sola sussista [...] le parole sono fatti – / credimi – sono la *cosa*. [...] nel caos dei tempi si sono agglutinate / al suo avido cuore innumerevoli / significanze. / Sfolgiando paziente / ogni parola come un bulbo vecchio / levato dalla sua casa di terra / ci troverai nel centro l’incorrotto / avvio, la vera prefazione / individua a una vita futura / al concregere al suo combinarsi / con sempre altro col sempre / nuovo – e il tentato eterno”

¹⁶ Also note how the gerund *sfogliando* (leafing through) contains the word *foglia* or leaf, which reinforces the vegetal imagery of the closing stanza.

and its more-than-human quality. For this reason, from this moment of disinterring on, the poet is forever striving to return the word to its earthy home, to recompose the unity of discourse and matter and thus rejoin the “uncorrupt” and “everlasting” of the concluding line of the poem. It is the essence of poetry to pursue this lost unison endlessly. In Menicanti’s poem the “uncorrupt beginning” of the bulb-word is tainted in two ways: one, through contact with humans—as described above—and two, through use. As they are incorporated into the structures of language, words become crystallized in their meanings as “scream, cry, comfort [...] sound [or] nonsense” (“grido conforto pianto [...] suono [o] nonsense”). We could say that from bulbs, self-contained entities full of potential to be anything, words bloom into just one and only one flower. For this reason, they lose their initial power of all-encompassing communication, which is much broader than just language itself and, above all, transcends the word by being one with the earth. As a consequence, Menicanti concludes, we feel the pull to grow-with and be-with, which is aptly expressed in the poem by the prefix *cum-* of the words *concreocere* and *combinare*. The lack of a period at the end of the poem signifies its open-endedness and constant striving toward that “everlasting” (“eterno”). It also indicates its lack of boundaries and total openness to contamination, or, to use Bennett’s words, the “porosity of the border between a human body and its out-side” (2010, 102). Marco Marchi defines Menicanti’s poetry as a “physiognomic mixture of various natures,” and Menicanti herself stated that writing poetry has always meant “living beyond and in others” and “going beyond the limitations” of living (516, 767).

In both Menicanti’s and Zanzotto’s poetry we find a desire to end what Marchi calls a “competition between two existences,” the human and the nonhuman (516). Starting with a premise similar to that of Zanzotto, where affection often meets concern for a living landscape that is threatened by human expansion, Menicanti’s poetic portraits are often marked by botanical references and are filled with an underlying empathy that crosses the boundaries between species. Her ability to acknowledge the presence of the other—whether human, vegetal, or animal—produces the images of cross-contamination that abound in her work. I will mention just a few examples of cross-species imagery that I have grouped into three categories: animal-vegetal, vegetal-mineral, and human-vegetal. A lizard is a “thin green leaf” (“sottile verde foglia”) or has “just bloomed” (“appena fiorita”); a snake blooms from the neck (“dal collo / sboccia la bestia”); a deer’s antlers are “two warm antler seeds” (“due caldi germogli di corno”) (*La vita è un dito* 254, 274, 475, 530). The moon becomes a flower: “It’s all in bloom, the moon,” and a “flower without a stem” (“È tutta in fiore la luna” and “fiore senza stelo”) (*La vita è un dito*, 266, 406). People morph into vegetal beings: an old man acquires a “blooming beard” (“barba fiorita”); the poet is compared to a leaf; a woman becomes a “thin birch tree” (“sottile betulla”) and a flower with “a long green neck” (“la lunga gola verde”); and, lastly, friends are a “safe clearing in the woods” (“radura”) (*La vita è un dito* 495, 414, 462, 290, 454).¹⁷

¹⁷ One note about Menicanti’s anthropomorphized portraits of vegetal and animal life is necessary to respond to possible objections that this practice may be inappropriate. Menicanti anthropomorphizes the nonhuman to identify cross-species contact zones. What Jeffrey Cohen writes regarding stone is also applicable to non-mineral life: “What if it is not anthropomorphizing to speak of a stone’s ability to resist

Menicanti crafted her poems painstakingly, devoting years to perfecting their style, language, and syntax. Their meticulously arranged forms contain within them a sense of the marvelous, so much so that her books may be labeled herbaria and bestiaries populated, in Marchi's words, by "bizarre beings," "cross-bred creatures, suspended between human and nonhuman" (517). Menicanti's semi-botanical, hybrid, metamorphic characters exhibit nearly magical qualities, which, in the overcrowded urban context of Milan, are often overlooked and threatened by destruction daily. Sharing their magical beauty, then, is their fearless and unavoidable way of "flaunting their vulnerability" in a place and at a time when and where the vegetal world seems to be under siege (Mullen 44).

If you look closely, you will notice that Menicanti's choice of words in the examples above communicates the frailty of fledgling life: "thin," "just," "bloom," "seeds." As mentioned earlier, such vulnerability is also acutely present in Zanzotto's poems of the 1960s and 1970s, where it is veined by a very intense anguish before the looming threat of industrial progress during the years of Italy's economic boom. Both Menicanti and Zanzotto, however, give life to what Piccari defines as "ample spaces of syntony" (445). For this reason, I encourage the use of the term "Symbiocene" to describe Zanzotto's and Menicanti's vision, since the term "underlines the interconnectedness of all species and biological processes and life" (Jones 156). Menicanti's poetry makes room for the nonhuman in two complementary ways: one, by zooming in on the plants that inhabit the city but are too often unseen and unheard because our human eyes and ears are no longer attuned to them and their ways of communication; and two, by transcending, through the poetic form, our traditional human-centric ways of deciphering the signs of the world around us so that we can evolve to contemplate and perhaps even adopt, complementary and parallel ways of expression that surpass the verbal.

One very evocative page from Michel Serres' *Biogea* denounces the limitations of being human when it comes to language and communication (196).¹⁸ But, he goes on, "we're beginning to decipher the codes of living things [...] which, like us, receive, transmit, store and process information" (196). Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic argue that language is not only evolving but also "an agent of [...] cultural change," and Zanzotto's and Menicanti's work demonstrates that poetry is especially suited for this role because of its intrinsic ability to push the boundaries of language beyond verbal communication (102). I see the emergence of this process of deciphering and of leaving

[...] and even of its sympathies, alliances, inclinations, and spurs?" (212). Similarly, Bennett argues that anthropomorphism can reveal "similarities across categorical divides and [light] up structural parallels between material forms in 'nature' and those in 'culture'" (99). More than anthropomorphizing, Menicanti's poetic portraits are intersectional suggestions of collaborative survival and of ways of challenging what Kathryn Yusoff identifies as "relations of domination and submission" characterized by "a network of power relations and subordinations" (30, 13). Menicanti employs anthropomorphism more as a rhetorical instrument than a philosophical approach or colonizing worldview.

¹⁸ Serres writes, "we only listen to languages and human rumblings. Constricted in our noises, we shut ourselves up in our clamors. By splashing about in this foul rubbish of meaning, we appropriate the world" (196). Serres condemns "this invasive invasion of our voices" and continues, "we're only interested in ourselves and our properties. Never in others" (196). When it comes to "non-anthropocentric perspectives," Satterfield and Slovic declare the limitations of language, especially that of science and policy, because these perspectives "are simply inexpressible" (2).

room for nonhuman expression in the tension in Menicanti's and Zanzotto's poetry, which all poetry has, to write "the non-written" and express "the non-said." This impossible expression of the inexpressible is the reason why poetry exists. Poetry is an attempt to negotiate otherness and communicate beyond the human. Poetry, as Zanzotto and Menicanti demonstrate, offers opportunities to avoid a univocal and exclusionary use of language by accommodating silence, ambiguity, hesitation, and indefiniteness, and thus bring the world closer. Inspired by Marder's term "vegetal hospitality" that describes the "sense of place" and the "habitable world" that plants provide, I propose the term "poetic hospitality" to explain Zanzotto's and Menicanti's literary openness to the nonhuman ("To Hear Plants Speak" 121). Their poems are an encouragement, in Patrícia Vieira's words, to "broaden our horizons, and [...] make them capacious enough to accommodate our animal and vegetal others" (230). These poets find a "continuum" from human to plant where "literature is a mediator in the aesthetic encounters" with the nonhuman (Vieira 218).¹⁹

Catriona Sandilands observes that paying attention, as Zanzotto and Menicanti do, to the interactions between multiple species and environments moves one from being simply an observer to becoming "part of these relationships" and respectfully "participating ... as an element" among others in this exchange (Sandilands 26; emphasis in original). As if building on this premise, in "Theriomorphist Manifesto," Roberto Marchesini draws attention to "our inherently hybrid status" and points to the "external contaminations" with which our condition of humans maintains "relational contracts established with the otherness." Within the sphere of Zanzotto's poetics, Andrea Cortellessa reminds us of the poet's use of a "soil-flesh" ("terra-carne") analogy from *Vocativo* and his self-description as "mold" ("muffetta") growing on the surface of the earth in *Conglomerati* (Cortellessa 43, 37). Marchesini's notion of theriomorphic poetics, rooted in a belief in life as "participation and unanimity," reinterprets "spaces traditionally considered human" through a vegetative lens and advances the type of "germination in alterity" that scaffolds Zanzotto's poetic operation and transpires from Menicanti's "bulbous" words. It is not simply an opening up to the nonhuman but—especially in Zanzotto's case—an "introjection of external entities" into the poetry-making process (Marchesini). The poet's work is at one time the medium and the product of a quest to contain, honor, and embrace the landscape's logos that overcomes verbal language (Cortellessa 37). Cortellessa quotes Sara Bubola regarding Zanzotto's tearing up of language not as the "end point but on the contrary [...] as a 'root' or a 'bud' from which 'a new type of poetry can sprout'" (Cortellessa 17). Here, the co-constitutive nature of

¹⁹ In *Filò*, written in the Venetian dialect, Zanzotto writes about poetry as a language that overcomes speciesism and binary oppositions: "and poetry isn't in any language / in any place [...] it's fullness and emptiness of the head-earth" ("e la poesia no l'è in gnessuna lengua / in gnessun logo [...] la è 'l pien e 'l vòdo dela testa-tera;" "e la poesia non è in nessuna lingua / in nessun luogo [...] è il pieno e il vuoto della testa-terra") (*Tutte le poesie* 496-99).

Zanzotto's poetry as a cross-species product of the entanglements of human verbal language and plants' nonverbal communication is in full display. Poetry's yen to crossover to the nonhuman realm exposes the limits of our humanness and in the encounters with the nonhumanness of the other reveals, to use Sandilands' words, "our plantiness," or the fact that we "are not really separate ... in our shared aliveness with plants" (Sandilands 19). As such, poetry makes visible the networks of mutual support, tolerance, and magnanimity of the Symbiocene or "organismic kinship", which is "an extraordinary dance of sustenance and relationship" (Sandilands 20, 26). This type of symbiotic "ecological kinship" lies at the core of Zanzotto's and Menicanti's poetic hospitality (Sandilands 19).

In *The Secret Life of Plants*, Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird remind us that in the 1700s Linnaeus' nomenclature system had reduced the vegetal world to static lists of plants species and genii, with the result of estranging people from botanical life (108). The restoration of life, dignity, and enchantment to the vegetal world came nearly a century later from the realm of poetry. It was Goethe, in fact, who, with *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, reversed Linnaeus' work and instilled wonder and passion back into the way we moderns looked at plants by observing them through a poet's eyes and describing them with sympathetic words. As Menicanti wrote in the opening poem of her very last book, *Ultimo quarto*—and I am sure Zanzotto would agree—"what matters / is always the word" ("Quel che conta / è sempre la parola") (*Il canto del grillo* 615). It must be, however, a poet's word, or one that, like a seed, does not tire of developing up and down at the same time, and, like a branch and a root, always searches for new territory to explore.

Submission received 13 July 2022

Revised version accepted 26 February 2023

Works Cited

- Albrecht, Glenn and Gavin Ban Horn. "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene." *Minding Nature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, pp. 12-16.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 1. 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 62-74.
- Brotto, Denis. *Logos Zanzotto*, in collaboration with Università' degli Studi di Padova (Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari), Gooliver Associazione Culturale, 2021.
- Bullock, Marcus and Michael W. Jennings, editors. *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Volume 1. 1913-1926*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Cacciari, Massimo. "I classici di Zanzotto." "A foglia ed a gemma." *Letture dall'opera poetica di Andrea Zanzotto*, edited by Massimo Natale and Giuseppe Sandrini, Carocci, 2016, pp. 9-15.
- Ceserani, Remo and Danilo Mainardi. *L'uomo, i libri e altri animali. Dialogo tra un etologo e un letterato*. Il Mulino, 2013.

- Coccia, Emanuele. *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*. Il Mulino, 2018.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone. An Ecology of the Inhuman*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Cortellessa, Andrea. *Zanzotto. Il canto nella terra*. Editori Laterza, 2021.
- Gagliano, Monica, John C. Ruan, and Patrícia Viera, editors. *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, and Gordon L. Miller. *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. MIT Press, 2009.
- Karen L. F. Houle. "A Tree by Any Other Name. Language Use and Linguistic Responsibility." *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ruan, and Patrícia Viera, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 155-72.
- International Year of Plant Health, <http://www.fao.org/plant-health-2020/home/en/>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2021.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Opperman, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- . "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2012, pp. 448-75.
- Irigaray, Luce, and Michael Marder. *Through Vegetal Being. Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Irigaray, Luce. "What the Vegetal World Says to Us." *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ruan, and Patrícia Viera, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 126-35.
- Jones, Lucy. *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild*. Penguin, 2020.
- Marder, Michael. "To Hear Plants Speak." *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ruan, and Patrícia Viera, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 103-25.
- Lorenzini, Niva. *Dire il silenzio: la poesia di Andrea Zanzotto*. Carocci, 2014.
- Lunardi, Costanza, "Genius loci: Andrea Zanzotto tra erbe e fiori." *Andrea Zanzotto tra Soligo e Laguna veneta*, edited by Gilberto Pizzamiglio. Leo Olschki Editore, 2008, pp. 111-16.
- . "Nel Kēpos della poesia." *Andrea Zanzotto, la natura, l'idioma*, edited by Francesco Carbognin, Canova, 2018, pp. 307-14.
- Marchesini, Roberto. "Theriomorphist Manifesto." https://www.academia.edu/95839295/Theriomorphist_Manifesto. Accessed 3 Feb. 2023.
- Marchi, Marco. "Prefazione." In *Il concerto del grillo. L'opera poetica completa con tutte le poesie inedite*, edited by Brigida Bonghi, Fabio Minazzi, and Silvio Raffo, Mimesis, 2013, pp. 515-17.
- Menicanti, Daria. *Ferragosto*. Lunarionuovo, 1986.
- . *Ultimo quarto*. Scheiwiller, 1990.
- , and Matteo M. Vecchio. *La vita è un dito: tutte le poesie*. Ladolfi, 2012.
- , Brigida Bonghi, Fabio Minazzi, and Silvio Raffo. *Il concerto del grillo. L'opera poetica completa con tutte le poesie inedite*. Mimesis, 2013.

- Mullen, Harryette. *Urban Tumbleweed. Notes from a Tanka Diary*. Graywold Press, 2013.
- Natale, Massimo, and Giuseppe Sandrini, editors. "A foglia ed a gemma." *Letture dall'opera poetica di Andrea Zanzotto*. Carocci, 2016.
- Pera, Pia. *Al giardino ancora non l'ho detto*. Ponte delle Grazie, 2016.
- Piccari, Giampaolo. "Scheda editoriale." *Il concerto del grillo. L'opera poetica completa con tutte le poesie inedite*, edited by Brigida Bonghi, Fabio Minazzi, and Silvio Raffo, Mimesis, 2013, pp. 444-46.
- Ryan, John C. "In the Key of Green? The Silent Voices of Plants in Poetry." *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ruan, and Patrícia Vieira, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 273-96.
- Sandilands, Catriona. "Vegetate." *Veer Ecology. A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 16-29.
- Satterfiled, Terre and Scott Slovic. *What's Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values*. The University Utah Press, 2004.
- Serres, Michel. *Biogea*. Univocal. 2012.
- Tompkins, Peter, and Christopher Bird. *The Secret Life of Plants*. 1973. Harper, 2002.
- Vieira, Patrícia. "Pythographia. Literature as Plant Writing." *The Language of Plants. Science, Philosophy, Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 215-33.
- Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocene or None*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Zanzotto, Andrea. *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Andrea Zanzotto. A Bilingual Edition*, edited and translated by Patrick Barron, The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- . *Tutte le poesie*. Milano: Mondadori, 2011.

Ocean Acidification as a Hyperobject: Mediating Acidic Milieus in the Anthropocene

Oriol Batalla
University of Barcelona
oriolbatalla.95@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4326>



Abstract

Through the usage of Timothy Morton's hyperobjects (2013) as a heuristic, this essay aims to portray how Ocean Acidification can be read as a hyperobject affecting tropical seawaters and beyond. Furthermore, it illustrates how the arts and humanities, through their hermeneutical gaze, might help us grasp Ocean Acidification as a hyperobject and the wide array of other objects that act upon each other in such acidic oceanic waters. In this task, the article will close-read the *Underwater Woman* set of pictures by Christine Ren (2018) understanding the interpretation of art as a tool to reconnect cognition and emotion to move from the understanding of a crisis to the feeling of such crisis. Finally, it aims to shed light upon the implications arising from considering Ocean Acidification as a hyperobject. By connecting the theoretical, visual and political in the same narrative, this essay highlights the transformative potential of interpretation and thinking through hyperobjects. With this, the challenges of the Anthropocene are put at the forefront, situating specific events and problematics in a planetary scale.

Keywords: Anthropocene, hyperobjects, ocean acidification, new materialism, environmental humanities.

Resumen

A través de la teoría de los Hiperobjetos de Timothy Morton (2013) como herramienta de análisis, este ensayo trata de ilustrar cómo la acidificación oceánica se ha convertido en un hiperobjeto, afectando las aguas más allá de los trópicos. Con esto en consideración, el ensayo busca analizar la manera en la cual las artes y las humanidades, a través de su mirada hermenéutica, pueden ayudarnos a comprender estos hiperobjetos junto con los diferentes objetos que actúan sobre ellos mismos en un entorno ácido. En esta tarea, analiza el set de fotografías *Underwater Woman* de Christine Ren (2018), comprendiendo la interpretación del arte como una herramienta para reconectar cognición con emoción, moviendo el sujeto desde la comprensión hasta la experiencia sensorial de la actual crisis. Finalmente, el artículo trata, de manera muy ambiciosa, de arrojar luz sobre las implicaciones que tiene discernir la acidificación oceánica como un hiperobjeto interconectado con otros agentes. Comprendiendo lo teórico, lo visual y lo político en una sola narrativa y sumergiéndola en un medio subacuático ácido, este ensayo destaca el potencial transformativo que tienen la interpretación y el razonar a través de hiperobjetos a la hora de entender los retos de la época actual situando los problemas y eventos específicos del Antropoceno en el centro de la cuestión en una escala planetaria.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, hiperobjetos, acidificación oceánica, nuevo materialismo, humanidades ambientales.

In her work called *The Underwater Woman* (2018), Christine Ren presents the audience with different sets of images that trigger the viewers to recast and reconsider different problems and crises that are happening below the sea surface. In a storytelling manner and with an eclectic set of skills and disciplines that mixes photography, apnea, performance, dance and marine science, Ren dives deep into the issues that are threatening the seawaters of the Earth in a local and global sense. From jellyfish blooms due to the unbalance of ecosystems due to climate change to trawling nets and overfishing, the evocative and performative media Ren creates, allows the viewers to immerse themselves underwater and expand their understandings of the imagery common to the current anthropocentric view of Western rationalist ideology. In this sense, the conjunction between the performative arts and biology become one in order to broaden the perspectives of the viewers, unifying disciplines that have been separated in their discourses for many decades.



Figure 1: *Underwater Woman* by Christine Ren, 2018

This essay aims to utilize an Environmental Humanities and New Materialism lens in order to demonstrate how Ocean Acidification (OA) can be read as a hyperobject, immersing the analysis in an underwater milieu that challenges terrestrial Western ontological and phenomenological structures. Thinking through hyperobjects means that the different problems that OA causes in the tropics need to be situated in a planetary scale in the Anthropocene. As the Planetary Boundaries have shown¹, OA, species extinction and global warming are part of the same problem and should be understood as interrelated.

¹ The Planetary Boundaries frame the safe operating space for humanity in the Anthropocene, proposing nine processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth system. Crossing one of them is thought to have non-linear catastrophic planetary consequences. These are: stratospheric ozone depletion, loss of biosphere integrity, chemical pollution and the release of novel entities, climate change, ocean acidification, freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle, land system change, nitrogen and phosphorus flows into the biosphere and oceans, atmospheric aerosol loading (Rockström et al., n.p.).

Furthermore, the essay seeks to portray how the arts and humanities, through their hermeneutical gaze, might help us grasp OA as a hyperobject in relation to the different objects that act upon each other in acidic waters. By close-reading the *Underwater Woman* pictures by Christine Ren that deal with OA, this article thus argues that artistic representations can be crucial for generating awareness in people unacquainted with current climate science. This process reconnects cognition and formal knowledge with the world of emotions. Finally, it ambitiously aims to shed light upon the different implications coming to terms with OA as a hyperobject interconnected with other agents. As such, the ocean becomes an element that helps us theorize the materiality of history, placing itself as a space of narratives that can challenge anthropocentrism and the given stories of human history.

In the turmoil of the vast number of global ecological crises currently ongoing, this essay focuses on the set of Ren's images that deal with Ocean Acidification. It is not a random choice but, in fact, one quite helpful for making clear that certain crises flowing invisibly with uneven temporal and spatial frames can be rendered visible in art. The artworks mediate these crises in ways accessible to the human eye by enacting a union between the rational findings of factual sciences and the hermeneutic and cathartic nature of certain artistic disciplines. In other words, by connecting the theoretical, visual and political in the same narrative complementing each other, this essay illustrates the transformative potential of interpretation and thinking through hyperobjects with the help of OA and Ren's work. Such a study reveals that Western rationality and the anthropocentrism of the current epoch might not be the best practice for coming to terms with events that happen in temporalities and spaces that human rationality itself cannot fully experience. Hence, mediations and a unity between the sciences and the performative arts might break the outdated division between them in a crisis that calls for cooperation, attentiveness, and care in a non-anthropocentric way.

With this, the challenges of the Anthropocene are put at the forefront, situating specific events and problematics in a planetary scale. That is, this article aims to contribute to the dismantling of the problematic "rationalism" by immersing analysis in an underwater and acidic milieu that will expand and reshape ontology, phenomenology and epistemology. By doing this, the rationalist and anthropocentric view that has dominated hegemonic capitalist human culture is challenged, arguing that the arts and the humanities together with scientific findings can steer the viewer towards a better and more egalitarian comprehension of the ecological crisis, weirding the coherence of the rational world as we know it.

Acidic Waters

Since the Industrial Revolution, the pH value of the oceans has fallen from 8.2 to 8.1. With a logarithmic nature, this drop in the pH of seawater represents an average of a 30% increase in acidity over the past two centuries as the ocean acts similar to a sponge to capture and store CO₂ released into the atmosphere, making us go back 55 million years so as to find a similar process in terms of Ocean Acidification (OA) (Hayes 3). OA

occurs when CO₂ is absorbed into seawater at a high rate. When this absorption takes place, chemical reactions happen. CO₂ reacts with water molecules (H₂O) to form carbonic acid (H₂CO₃). This, in turn, breaks down into a hydrogen ion (H⁺) and bicarbonate (HCO₃⁻) generating, with the presence of all these hydrogen ions, a decline in the pH of the water or, in other words, acidifying seawater (NOAA n.p.).² These reactions “reduce the seawater pH, carbonate ion concentration and saturation states of biological important calcium carbonate minerals” (NOAA n.p.). In areas that are bountiful in terms of sea life, seawater tends to be supersaturated with calcium carbonate minerals. Calcium carbonate minerals are the foundation of skeletons and shells of a wide array of marine lifeforms. Thus, ongoing acidification is de-saturating many oceanic ecosystems to become undersaturated with calcium carbonate minerals, affecting the ability of some organisms to produce and maintain shells (NOAA n.p.). To put it another way, and although fully portraying this goes beyond the scope of this article, there is a historical-materialist connection between the history of capitalism and OA, and how capitalism has generated the unbalanced and multispecies/multiobject nature of the Anthropocene that, sooner or later, will have a global presence due to the transgression of the Planetary Boundaries.

Yet, acid oceans can only be perceived through mediation. This means that bodies need to be submerged over a notable period of time to start sensing these chemical changes in the environment. Unlike other events such as coral bleaching, it is not visually spectacular and, unlike human-generated debris at sea, it is more difficult to conceptualize and isolate as an event (Hayes 3). OA is then rather-invisible and less immediate in terms of aggressiveness due to its chemical nature compared to other stressors such as sea-surface temperature rises, trawling or seafloor mining. Yet, in such an acidic milieu, bodies are undone, put at stake and recast in their uncanny surroundings.

Here it is pivotal to acknowledge the obvious yet oft denied fact that human culture is always inherently connected with the physical world, despite claims that humanity has disentangled itself from the world through technology. Recalling our entanglements now, in the Anthropocene, requires new ways of perceiving ecology such as theoretical and mediative modes of understanding that describe the current epoch as constituted by infinite flows and forces (Alaimo 16). In this light, the ocean is no longer the *aqua nullius*³ realm. Human intervention and capitalist accumulation have affected in one way or another most of the Earth’s oceans and seas. These seas and oceans are now “understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies— all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries” (DeLoughrey 34). In other words, it allows human beings to reconsider their existence and challenge established beliefs as meaning itself is put into question. Therefore, thinking ecologically here makes us situate the thinking body in a specific ecological field, understanding the roles that the different materialities play and how they constitute the

² Formula: CO₂ + H₂O → (H⁺) + (HCO₃⁻)

³ Paraphrasing *Terra Nullius* as the land of none, concept appropriated during colonization processes, *Aqua Nullius* was the last stage of the oceans and seas before being absorbed by the omnipresence of humankind (DeLoughrey 34).

exceptional relations between the body and its environment in the Anthropocene (Hayes 21).

As Timothy Morton (2018) pointed out, ecological awareness is a “detailed and increasing sense, in science and outside of it, of the innumerable relationships among lifeforms and between life and non-life” (*Being Ecological* 128). Therefore, theoretically speaking, the task of the Environmental Humanities is not just coming to terms with this statement, but also to figure out what this interconnection means in the realms of sensing and acting. Thus, here Morton’s concept of *hyperobject* (2013) becomes of noteworthy relevance. Hyperobjects are “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (*Hyperobjects* 1), which can be human-made and non-human entities, and share some common traits: all of them are viscous, molten, nonlocal, phased and interobjective. Hyperobjects are entities that exceed human apprehension due to their vastness, yet we can sense them in specific local manifestations. Therefore, hyperobject theory poses challenges to the ideas of nation, state, border, individualism, ecology, culture, ontology, anthropocentrism and capitalism. In fact, thinking through hyperobjects questions if a multispecies and multi-object knowledge is possible and how current narratives can be challenged. Furthermore, this approach might help us adopt a theory of a structured natural necessity or nature of being in relation to how beings are modified in time and space, and how these changes can be philosophically understood in their milieus. In other words, approaching elements from this lens allows us to grasp the incongruences of time and space when it comes to non-anthropocentric agents and how relationships are not linear or balanced since most of the relationships between human and non-human entities need to be understood in a time and space different from our own.

Ocean Acidification as a Hyperobject

Ocean Acidification can be perceived as a hyperobject as it seems to meet, *a priori*, the five features of hyperobjects. OA is *viscous*, as it adheres and affects the different living and non-living agents touched by it. It portrays an ecological interconnectedness that cannot be untied. Thus, thinking through and coexisting with OA leads us to the logical and material discernment that, as a hyperobject, the more you try to get rid of OA, the more you realize it is there. To put it another way, all lifeforms immersed in acidic waters are, in one way or another, affected by OA. Shells dissolve, coral reefs perish, and ecosystems as a whole become victims of this acidification. This viscosity sheds light upon the different simultaneous and contradictory temporalities and “the breakdown and (re)formation of new multitemporal relations” (Bastian and van Dooren 7).

In turn, OA is also *molten*⁴. Like climate change, OA is molten in terms of time and space in the sense that it stretches and reshapes to such vast extent that, even though it might be part of most of the seas and oceans in the world, humans are not able to logically

⁴ Although Morton used the term “temporal undulation” in *Hyperobjects* (2013), this essay aligns with the concept of “molten” proposed by Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010).

grasp its limitations, making OA an uncanny realization. In other words, humans are “faced with the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic” (*Dark Ecology* 25). Thus, the naked eye and human linear consciousness are unable to grasp the different, uneven, multiple time-spaces and realities in the current planetary epoch. OA is therefore an entity that lets us know that it exists, but we become accustomed to its existence without being able to perceive it as a whole. This is because humans have a logic based on a terrestrial milieu.⁵ That is why, when we observe OA by an underwater lens and regard ontology, one can actually understand the fact that non-acidic oceans have become strange and acidic oceans have become the norm. In order to come to terms with such trait, artificial mediation is needed to enable humans to fully grasp the molten existence of OA.

Furthermore, OA is nonlocal and phased. Its nonlocality is defined regarding the fact that hyperobjects are never experienced directly, since the immediate appearance of a hyperobject in the physical world does not correspond to its reality. To put it another way, as Morton (2013) postulated, “nonlocality means just that – there is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local. Locality is an abstraction” (47). It would take a lot of time for a human to perceive OA as it is without being immersed for a large period of time underwater, but we can in turn perceive it through the causes OA has in direct or indirect terms: ecosystem degradation, species extinction, scarcity of resources for local fisheries, just to name a few. In terms of phased agency, OA seems to be a parallax that comes and goes between and through different objects in three-dimensional space. However, if provided with another multidimensional lens, this would appear to be very different. In this light, climate change, fine dust, the biosphere or black holes are all hyperobjects if we consider the ideas of nonlocality and phasing (Eperjesi 238).

Thinking through non-locality might allow theoreticians to expand the time-space framework in which ecological agents, objects and events unfold and intertwine with one another. In light of this, when we see that OA is affecting in the most severe way the South-Pacific Ocean and the Tropic of Capricorn (Earth Institute n.p.), thinking through the non-locality of OA makes us go beyond the framed region itself, acknowledging that a) OA is uneven in a planetary scale and b) the causes of OA are not found in the framed region per se. To put it differently, and although it is beyond the scope of this work to develop a full cause-effect narrative between globalized extractive capitalism perpetrated by the global north and OA, it is pivotal to understand that this causality is a fact as postulated by the Planetary Boundaries theory.

Going back to the tropics, Australia is the world’s largest exporter of coal, iron ore, bauxite or alumina amongst other mining assets. The extraction of these goods by far exceeds its domestic consumption (Granwal n.p.). As one of the countries that will be affected the most by the transgression of the Planetary Boundaries, Australia is

⁵ Human knowledge is terrestrial in the sense that the milieu in which humans coexist and interrelate with human and non-human entities is based on solid ground. As Melody Jue (2020) considered, when we are put in a milieu that is not terrestrial (for instance, when scuba-diving) the conceptions and feelings of time, space, mobility or breathing, for instance, are put at stake and brought to a new realm. Thus, it might be interesting to try to veer towards this kind of non-terrestrial thinking when approaching coexistence, multispecies interactions and ecological thought.

nevertheless not addressing the problem seriously. Many areas, especially the Whitsundays/Cairns areas, solely rely on an ecosystem that is dying due to the transgression of the Planetary Boundaries and the eco-tourism that takes place there: the Great Barrier Reef. However, although it would be relatively easy to blame Australia due to its proximity, industrial and mining force and their consequent emissions of pollutants over other countries such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji or the FSM in the South-Pacific Ocean, in terms of the generation of OA, as a non-local hyperobject, OA allows us to stretch the causes to the world-ecology system. That is, for instance, one should not turn a blind eye to the fact that currently China is probably the major polluter in the world (Lu et al. 1423). Nonetheless, this is also an event of non-locality. The main reason why China is a major polluter, and—hypocritically—pinpointed by other countries as such, is because companies from all over the world, have moved their production to China and Southeast Asia. They have done so to reduce labor costs, have easier access to cheap labor in general, and get away with fewer environmental regulations (Eperjesi 240). Pollution generated there is a symptom of a transboundary generation of pollution in the production-accumulation system in order to satisfy the demand of goods in the global north. However, this phasing moves even further away from mainland China and Australia, to put OA in a planetary scale as a consequence of coal-burning, mass-accumulation or transportation worldwide.

OA is thus viscous, molten, non-local and phased. The sense of time-space in which OA flows makes it, as already aforementioned, very difficult for the human eye and consciousness to grasp. Hyperobjects that flow in such time-spaces are like an “ultra-slow-motion nuclear bomb” (*Hyperobjects* 125), as their effects are almost invisible until, in this case, entire ecosystems perish.

Finally, OA is interobjective as it is formed through and has effects on the relationships it generates with other objects. OA, in this sense, gets enmeshed in the strange interconnectedness in which almost all entities exist. Understanding such a vast mesh of relationships and agencies can lead one to understand the signification of thinking through hyperobjects. Namely, OA generates meshy relationships with full marine ecosystems, from plankton to sharks, from coral reefs to whales. In a multispecies and multi-object world, thinking about OA as a hyperobject, makes even clearer the meshy relationship that exists between human and non-human living beings, and beyond-human agents. As Bastian and van Dooren (2017) highlighted, “in these and other fundamental ways, this is a period in which relationships between life and death, creation and decay, have become uncanny; no longer entailing what was once taken for granted” (2). Then, as stated in the introduction of the text, realizing the existence of this mesh of different relationships makes us rethink the temporalities, spaces and synchronizations of the different lifeforms and forms of life that play part, in one way or another, within the mesh.

This interobjectivity, in turn, puts front and center the force of capitalism in the Anthropocene. Human activities based on the grounds of capitalist accumulation and the consequences it entails have infused non-human ecosystems with new substances that are alien to them. The different narratives of hyperobjects highlight the fact that “the battle against the capitalist production of climate change must be waged at several levels

simultaneously” (Hartley 165). As a consequence, new meanings, relationships and (de)synchronizations between human, non-human and beyond-human entities have been generated. To put it another way, thinking through interobjectiveness in the mesh of the hyperobject that OA seems to be, allows us to discern harmful alien agents that should not be in a given ecosystem, and yet that enter a synchronized system, desynchronizing and, in most of the cases, destroying the ecosystem itself.

Hyperobjects in Morton’s formulation seem, however, to embed some proliferating contradictions in our coexistence with other objects. They confront us with the strangeness of the world and an anti-romantic view of nature itself while, at the same time, generating a greater feeling of knowing and intimacy with the entities that surround us (Heise, 2014). Nonetheless, and considering these critiques and weaknesses, if we understand that the Earth is not just a non-living entity but a living one in the biological sense sustained by the different knots of life and complex physiological and ecological processes, hyperobjects allow us to move well beyond the traditional view of ecology. That is, reason as an element coming from the Enlightenment is put into question and the idea of humanity as the center of life crumbles down because it starts to make no sense if we are to understand such vast and non-even processes. In addition, and as discussed below in this text, the recognition of hyperobjects might mean the end of modernity and reason as we know them in our multi-entity world similar to Gaia.

Therefore, thinking through OA as a hyperobject demonstrates the fact that we are living in the Anthropocene, an epoch that does not affect all regions at the same level or at the same time. Nevertheless, this patchiness will start to become blurrier as effects of these transgressions will move from the local catastrophes to the planetary scale. Finally, this realization also acknowledges the risk that not coming to terms with these hyperobjects that are gigantic and imperceptible without being mediated, can generate the transgression of the thresholds established by the Planetary Boundaries.

The effects of OA are not directly perceived by humans due to their slow-motion nature, invisibility and non-locality when seen through a three-dimensional lens. Thus, coming to terms with OA and its hyperobjectic nature calls for a rejection of human rationality extrapolated to natural ecosystems from a Cartesian, Spinozian or Leibnizian tradition. This rejection is necessary because these modes of reflection lead to an understanding of the physical world from anthropocentric models based on a terrestrial milieu as a starting point of analysis. Therefore, this postulation allows us to acknowledge that environmental ecology benefits from being discerned as an epistemological system based on an understanding of nonlinear systems and causality, including human, non-human and beyond-human agents in the mesh. Namely, it calls for a perception that rejects anthropocentric linear understandings, as linearity deprives them from the ability to unfold or unpack their agency in theoretical terms (Guattari 45; Bastian 99).

With that said, according to mainstream concepts, rationality presupposes that by knowing a subject from the outside, it can be grasped completely, whereas a hyperobject cannot be grasped in this way. It calls for the aforementioned deviation from traditional reason towards an ontology that discerns the planetary ecology as a world in which living and non-living agents coexist and interact with each other on their own individual and

collective terms, and that get intertwined in the knots of life that shape ecology itself. Therefore, thinking through hyperobjects from a new materialist lens allows us to question anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene itself, as human culture as a product of the material world must be understood and analyzed as part of ecology and nature, not as its antithesis.

Mediating Hyperobjects: The Case of the Underwater Woman

Thus, to mediate OA in order to understand it, one needs to go beyond the 'natural' or the 'rational' to put it in a timescale understandable for the human three-dimensional perception at first sight. Here it might be interesting to think through Santiago Zabala's (2017) assumptions on art and emergency. For Zabala (2017), in the current age of globalized late-capitalism, every socioeconomic, cultural, political and ecological phenomenon is put at stake through an objective analysis. Only what is confined in the rationality of calculability is seen as the real, while the rest is obliterated from the discourse. Therefore, even though OA can, be calculated through scientific reason in a way, it is very difficult to generate a discourse that allows the current rationality of the system to frame all the dangers it entails from a multispecies and multi-object perspective.

For Zabala (2017), the biggest emergency of all is the *lack of emergency*. In other words, although the media apparatuses are bombarding societies with emergencies, the current hegemonic conception in industrialized countries is that nothing new happens. Thus, reality seems fixed and secured, framed within ideology and seen through an invisible infrastructure (Zabala 7). In light of this, it is no surprise that the transgression of four of the nine Planetary Boundaries and the fact that planet Earth is facing no-return thresholds in the near future is in fact "an indication that the emergency they entail for our lives is hidden, absent" (*Why Only Art Can Save Us* 94).

According to Zabala (2017), as a hermeneutics philosopher, "the truth of art no longer rests in representations of reality but rather in an existential project of transformation" (10). Interpretation becomes an event that adds vitality to artistic representations, mobilizing our internal self. The shock produced by an artistic representation puts at stake the established and rational truths, calling for a consideration of the Other, such as the non-human agents. This process aids the viewing subject to recast and refine their political and cultural ideas with each situation so as to avoid falling into the capitalist realism surrounding us. To put it another way, interpretation becomes crucial in order to avoid clinging to the ideological principles that are inherent in capitalism in an automatic manner. As Zabala (2017) illustrates, artistic representations might inform us of the emergency at hand and also make us participate in a hermeneutical exercise to "call into question our comfortable existences" (122).



Figure 2: Underwater Woman by Christine Ren, 2018

In this sense, images such as *The Underwater Woman* by Christine Ren (2018) help us approach the dangers of OA, its hyperobjectical traits and the emergencies it entails. The set of photographs portrays a woman entangled in different elements or events that are endangering the oceans (microplastic debris, trawling, overconsumption, coral bleaching and ocean acidification)⁶. This set, in turn, reveals the fact that humankind and its practices are directly linked to these ecological calls, and that we are directly enmeshed with them. These frames raise the question of emergence because they alter the notion of the mesh. That is, bearing Zabala in mind, they shed light upon emergencies in an alien milieu, quantified through rationality as individual emergencies but not connected with the different entities entangled in the mesh. Realizing this belonging and dependency to a holistic multispecies and multi-object mesh, renders subjects disoriented. What is crucial then is that the subject is positioned vis-à-vis its dis-reorientation, not asking questions on “who is lost or who is foreign, who is comfortable or who has colonized, who decides where maps stop and start, but rather what kind of relationality explains who feels dis- or re-oriented” (Martin and Rosello 1).

⁶ Although they are not presented in the visual material integrated in the text, the different representations and performances by Christine Ren can be accessed and viewed here: <http://www.theunderwaterwoman.com/>



Figure 3: Underwater Woman by Christine Ren, 2018

Interesting for this article is the set of images that represent OA in Christine Ren's work. In these images, the mermaid, who resembles Botticelli's Venus in *The Birth of Venus*, is blowing air underwater towards a nautilus shell, dissolving it in the process. Seemingly inspired by David Liittschwager's shell photographs for the NOAA PMEL Carbon Program (2017), the carbonated air the mermaid is blowing is in fact acidic and puts into question the agency of humankind and its modus vivendi. Through the different elements present (humankind, acidic water, the ocean) and absent (reminiscences of accumulation, pollution or globalization, for instance), this project enhances hermeneutic engagements and critical connections between the different agents that play part in OA. As briefly mentioned in the introduction of this essay, Ren challenges Western rationality and, with the union of different artistic and scientific disciplines, tries to modify and recast the narrative and the underwater imaginary that said rationality and anthropocentrism entail.

The choice of colors also appears as a very important element for Ren in order to create a coherent narrative and an illuminating experience for the viewer. The usage of very pale tone on the mermaid's skin contrasting with an almost pitch-black background with shades of dark blue reminds the viewer of the vast immensity of the ocean in opposition with the human. From a speculative lens, one could also say that the pale tone of the mermaid's skin, even though it is clearly inspired by Greek and Neoclassic sculpture, suggests the deathly agency humankind has acquired in terms of ecological degradation. The corpse-like tone and the inexpressive face of the mermaid, together with the carbonated air that the mermaid is blowing, can steer the viewer towards the realization that humankind is, in fact, dead inside. This realization can hardly be deemed coincidental, at least in terms of the motto and aims of Ren's work, since it has been this deathly anthropocentrism what has led the world towards an unparalleled ecological destruction and, in this case, the crisis that OA poses.

With that said, this set of images shows us how the hyperobjects theory makes sense with regard to OA. As aforementioned, OA takes part in time and space frames that

are uncanny or, at least, complicated to understand through human rationality, and it also reflects the existence of humankind together with, and inseparable from, the living and non-living agents that coexist together among us. By putting together a shell, carbonated air and a mermaid (half woman, half fish), the existence of OA as a hyperobject is brought front and center in a way that the human eye can perceive. In other words, the acidic elements of the ocean and its interconnectedness between the different agents that play part in this mesh is illustrated in just one frame.

To sum up, this work falls into the paradigm of the globalization of art as it addresses and provides coherence both to our own humanity and to the necessity of finding meanings that the paradigm of the lack of emergencies is unable to provide (Danto xvi). Artistic expressions such as this one, due to their straightforward yet allegorical nature, may not appeal to the individual connoisseur or the elevated knowledge of their viewers. This piece is clear in the message and intention it has, and it is very well stated in all the sections of the website where viewers can access this work. They also leave some room for the viewers to engage with them and think through them, putting the different crises that the ocean is suffering at the center of the debate, whether the viewer is acquainted with the problem at hand or not. With that said, images such as these ones have the power of meaning and the possibility of truth that depends upon the interpretation that viewers bring into play (Danto 155). As Zabala (2017) pointed out with Heidegger and Gadamer in mind, “hermeneutics does not seek compromises but interpretations, reactions and, most of all, interventions” (24).

As largely allegorical photographs, they aim to reconnect ontologically humankind with otherness, unmaking and reconfiguring the ways the viewers embody the experience of living in a world with acidic oceans. Thus, submerging ontology and thought, even if it is just metaphorically-speaking, is of paramount importance to think with, interact with and reconnect with the seas and the different temporal strands that co-exist there. As Stacy Alaimo (2011) pointed out,

Submersing ourselves, descending rather than transcending, is essential lest our tendencies toward Human exceptionalism prevent us from recognizing that, like our hermaphroditic, aquatic evolutionary ancestor, we dwell within and as part of a dynamic, intra-active, emergent, material world that demands new forms of ethical thought and practice [...] thinking with sea creatures may also provoke surprising affinities. (283)

Consequently, the pictures portraying OA in Ren’s work, when put under a hermeneutical and underwater gaze, force us to think differently in a non-terrestrial medium. In other words, immersing analysis allows the viewer to get disentangled from terrestrial biases, recasting ideas on the political, the cultural and the ecological. Therefore, new multispecies and multi-object engagements challenge the anthropocentric terrestrial existence, epistemology and ontology.

Furthermore, Ren’s work also puts into question the instability of the Anthropocene. Referring back to Niall Martin and Mireille Rosello’s disorientation (2016), with their connection between the human, the non-human animal and the non-human material, the photographs disorient the viewer. This disorientation, in turn, brings front and center some problematic aspects of humanity’s agency and, thus, of the prefix

Anthropos in the Anthropocene, shedding light upon its potential inadequacy in order to frame the current geological age. Namely, the set of images challenges the problematic that the Anthropocene poses by framing the planet as a holistic entity in a rather stable geological period. Even though one might think that the very idea of Anthropocene already puts the notion of stability into question, the idea of a period dominated by the geological agency of humankind leaves some blanks in the discourse that might steer the human perspective towards an acceptance of a domination of the *Anthropos* over the other entities. In this period, abnormalities become an accepted commonplace. And, although it is not the aim of this essay to fully develop on this matter, by abnormalities here one should understand, for instance, the idea of the physical and intellectual domination of humankind over the rest of the entities that co-exist on the planet. Therefore, the Anthropocene is, by no means, stable. The Anthropocene as an established term for the realist regime of geopower becomes central and alternative nomenclatures such as Capitalocene, Necrocene or Chthulucene arise in order to reject anthropocentrism itself. When new nomenclatures arise, theory, ontology and the environment are rethought and open new spaces for discussion, critique and engagement. At the same time, this debate becomes of paramount importance for original thinking regarding the agency of humankind, the power of mass-accumulation, the current state of emergency and justice from a multispecies and multi-object lens.

In addition, these pictures shed light upon the fact that what a priori seemed normal or a commonplace becomes suspicious as the set of pictures brings the abnormalities to the surface. To put it differently, the ocean is portrayed as an area in which humankind has become abnormal due to its extractivist and accumulative practices and that abnormality has become the norm in the Anthropocene. By scrutinizing the set of pictures on OA through hermeneutical interpretation, the viewer is able to recognize the abnormalities that are present both in OA and the Anthropocene while, at the same time, emotionally engaging with the ontological reparation of the different abnormalities. Namely, these pictures elude the historical ignorance about oceanic waters, at least their depths and living compositions; dedicating greater attention to the waters and their increasing acidity adds both to the fascination of the ocean and to the destruction of oceanic ecosystems due to human practices.

In light of this, it seems that the greatest challenge scientists have today is not to demonstrate, for instance, the fact that coral reefs are bleaching. What they are faced with is the unwillingness of governments to take real action as very few have put degrowth policies into the debate and the IPCCs and COPs have failed to bring real changes to societies. Moreover, although science has been extremely helpful in terms of explaining the causes of the current crisis, it has failed to connect with a wider, laymen-audience due to its complexity, desecrating the narrative and reconnecting with the lack of emergencies. Here, notwithstanding that visual media has been central in the conceptualization of the Anthropocene, this imagery has been left in a secondary position by scientific portrayals of the crisis. This, together with the overexploitation of certain topics in climate change media such as graphics portraying emissions, experts speaking or already classic images of glaciers melting, has led many to a feeling of exhaustion and

detachment to what now seems mundane. Thus, there is the need to convey meaning with emotion. This necessity can be satisfied by the images presented by Christine Ren. They provide us with a connection between a scientific claim and an impactful representation that can appeal to an audience that is unacquainted with more formal knowledge of the crisis. The images originally connect the human and the non-human, making us think about the different relations that play a part, even if the viewer is not aware of what a theoretical hyperobject is. In other words, they allow the viewer to interpret the visual material from an underwater perspective, challenging Western rationality, reconnecting it with the realm of emotions. Consequently, the viewing process questioned and reframed in an alien underwater milieu.

As sociologist Peter Wagner (2016) put it, “the climate risk should have radically altered the human relation to nature, but it did not” (151). In this light, the inability to come to terms with hyperobjects such as OA calls for the sciences and humanities to join forces. This would allow these two broad disciplinary areas to reconsider what the “rational” is and to move beyond it towards a terrain of human significance and interpretation that steers beings towards an ontological intervention and the meaning of the emergencies. In other words, the arts and humanities, together with scientific data, can be important heuristics to illustrate the emergencies the world is facing because of their ability to create intensity and depth, difficult to find in other disciplines (Zabala 10). That is why, together with a rather hermeneutical approach, the arts and the humanities can be crucial to make the different emergencies of the contemporary world perceivable in the paradigm of the lack of emergencies but also to re-orientate the so-called “subject” itself. To put it more forcefully, and paraphrasing Jennifer Fay (2018), art and visual media help us observe and experience the current ecological crisis as an aesthetic practice that is both a risk and a necessity to come to terms with. Namely, as Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinic and Jeff Diamanti (2020) illustrated, thinking through and with OA in an interdisciplinary manner calls “for us to consider that what it means to be a human observer is to already veer toward and with an altered sense of meaning-making, detailing, and also weirding the coherence of the world” (6).

Conclusion: Matter, Politics and Aesthetics in Acidic Waters

Objects, elements, or events such as Ocean Acidification exist in states that are impossible for the human eye to grasp fully and are hardly ever given full attention to their existence and interconnectedness with the other elements that surround them and interact with them. As Graham Harman (2012) pointed out, “entities such as chairs, floors, streets, bodily organs, and the grammatical rules of our native language, are generally ignored as long as they function smoothly. Usually it is only their malfunction that allows us to notice them at all” (15). Thus, the increase in levels of acidification and its unbalanced consequences can steer us materially and ontologically to clearer understandings of the different theoretical dimensions inherent to OA if perceived as a hyperobject. As Zabala (2017) highlighted, “we cannot simply observe, describe, and understand emergencies without being part of them” (112). Here, artistic representations

that trigger interpretation are of paramount importance. Hence immersing ourselves within an acidic milieu with the help of visual and artistic material makes us realize the materialism entailed in OA and its hyperobjectic traits without having to be experts in climate science.

Therefore, it is here where thinking through hyperobjects as a hermeneutical heuristic and, precisely, perceiving OA as a hyperobject can be very helpful to grasp the dissuasive agency of OA itself. As shown throughout this discussion, OA is not easily seen or perceived unless it is mediated somehow. Using the hyperobjects theory, together with the mediative tools that Christine Ren offers in her work, OA becomes something tangible for the human eye. Through subjective interpretation, the viewer can come to terms with the uneven and non-linear nature of such an event, the way in which it affects other entities and how it is an actual emergency in the current paradigm. Bearing this in mind, thinking through hyperobjects in the Anthropocene can help us understand that environmental law sometimes does not grasp the planetary emergency, centering itself instead on the role of states and the financial problematics embedded within them. Furthermore, it also allows us to come to terms with the fact that locality is an abstraction, and that abstraction is also necessary to frame factual policy and political activism in order to confront and portray the inconsistencies and recast the world-ecology.

The unbalanced nature and hyperobjectivity OA represents in the current epoch, and the difficulties that reason has to come to terms with it, is a rather straightforward representation of the inadequacy of the established science, policy and economics approaches to understand the current ecological crisis (Sörlin 788). To put it differently, the belief that science alone can solve the situation in which the Earth and its living agents are at the moment is problematic since the central cause of this crisis is industrial, capitalist human practices that are claimed to be “rational.” Hence, even though the current ecological crisis glides as an uncanny spectrum over human reason, it still remains ungraspable for many economically-rich populations. The dangers are believed to happen at a geological distance that cannot jeopardize the comfort of their lives. At the same time, and as proposed throughout this essay, these dangerous events occur in space-time scales that are too complicated to be perceived fully by most individuals unless mediated.

The arts, humanities and social sciences can potentially generate a shift that challenges established truths such as the paradigm in which domination is largely based on previous formal privileges, such as inherited capital and, thus, social class positioning. It is here where artistic representations that move beyond the connoisseur and the scientifically-aware public play an important part as they move beyond these previous formal privileges to generate both an internal and external dialogue in their viewers. To put it another way, pieces such as the *Underwater Woman*, break the boundaries of domination as they not only appeal to a well-educated viewer in the arts, but also more broadly. They reconnect cognition and emotion in a necessary way to overcome the current indifference and the feeling of routine most of the current climate change media poses. Nonetheless, in a world in which artistic, mediative and theoretical interventions and projects have been left aside, usually inaccessible for the less-wealthy or less-educated, the cultural, political and transformative dimension of art is undermined. Thus,

one of the most important tasks that the arts, humanities and social sciences have is to bring this knowledge to a broader population while, at the same time, to give voice to the voiceless.

With that being said, the ocean presents itself as multispecies, multi-object space with profound and divergent modes of sensorial and phenomenal experience. This, together with the differences that terrestrial and oceanic milieus present, calls for analytic lenses that expand and include modes of embodied experience. The *Underwater Woman* set of images on OA allows the viewers to interpret and immerse their thoughts metaphorically in a manner that can recast and challenge the given reality and its ontological constructions. Consequently, it might open new spaces to generate connections with the nonhuman, understanding that scientific certainty and Western rational epistemology might need to be open to offer space for non-human interactions in a multispecies world. As a result, the unknown and the known are brought together to generate fruitful, egalitarian and multispecies/multi-object dialogues. When mediated, the ocean is presented as a space that is less alien. In turn, we experience it as more familiar and intertwined with human existence, calling for new ways of understanding it and relating with it, shedding light upon the emergencies and temporal compression of the Anthropocene.

Submission received 21 April 2021

Revised version accepted 23 December 2022

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. "Thinking as the Stuff of the World". *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 13-21.
- Alaimo, Stacy. "New Materialisms, Old Humanisms, or, Following the Submergible". *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2011, pp.280-284.
- Badia, Lynn, Marija Cetinic, and Jeff Diamanti. *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene*. Routledge, 2020.
- Bastian, Michelle, and Thom van Dooren. "Editorial Preface. The New Immortals: Immortality and Infinitude in the Anthropocene". *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-9. DOI: [10.5840/envirophil20171411](https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20171411).
- Bastian, Michelle. "Inventing Nature: Re-writing Time and Agency in a More-than-Human World". *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 47, 2009, pp. 99-116. <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2009/11/01/inventing-nature-re-writing-time-and-agency-in-a-more-than-human-world/>
- Danto, Arthur C. *What Art Is*. Yale University Press, 2013.
- . *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*. Columbia University Press, 2006.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene". *ACLA Forum: Oceanic Routes, Comparative Literature*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 32-44. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3794589>

- Earth Institute – Columbia University. “New Global Maps Detail Human-Caused Ocean Acidification”. *Earth Institute*. 2014. <https://www.earth.columbia.edu/articles/view/3211>. Accessed 18 March 2021.
- Eperjesi, John R. “Air Pollution in the Anthropocene: Fine Dust as a Hyperobject”. *문학과환경*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 235-272. <https://doi.org/10.36063/asle.2019.18.2.008>
- Fay, Jennifer. *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Granwal, Lynda. “Mining Industry in Australia: Statistics and Facts”. *Statista*. 2020. <https://www.statista.com/topics/4671/mining-industry-in-australia/>. Accessed 21 March 2021.
- Guattari, Félix. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pundar and Paul Sutton. 1989. The Athlone Press, 2000.
- Harman, G. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. London: Zero Books, 2012.
- Hartley, Daniel. “Anthropocene, Capitalocene and the Problem of Culture”. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, PM Press, 2016, pp. 154-165.
- Hayes, Megan. *An Oceanic Acid Trip: Forming Planetary Immersion*. MA Thesis. University of Amsterdam, 2019.
- Heise, Ursula K. “Ursula K. Heise Reviews Timoty Morton’s Hyperobjects”. *Critical Inquiry*. 2014. <https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/ursula.k.heise.reviews.timothy.morton>. Accessed 07 September 2021.
- Jue, Melody. *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Martin, Niall, and Mireille Rosello. “Disorientation: An Introduction”. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-16. DOI: [10.1080/14735784.2015.1128675](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2015.1128675)
- Morton, Timothy. *Being ecological*. Pelican Books, 2018.
- . *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- . *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- NOAA PMEL Carbon Program. “What is Ocean Acidification?”. *NOAA*. 2017. <https://www.pmel.noaa.gov/co2/story/What+is+Ocean+Acidification%3F>. Accessed 20 March 2021.
- Ren, Christine. *The Underwater Woman*. 2018. <http://www.theunderwaterwoman.com/>. Accessed 15 March 2021.
- Rockström, Johan, Will Steffen, Kevin Noone, Åsa Persson, F. Stuart III Chapin, Eric Lambin, Timothy M. Lenton, Marten Scheffer, Carl Folke, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Björn Nykvist, Cynthia A. de Wit, Terry Hughes, Sander van der Leeuw, Henning Rodhe, Sverker Sörlin, Peter K. Snyder, Robert Costanza, Uno Svedin, Malin Falkenmark, Louise Karlberg, Robert W. Corell, Victoria J. Fabry, James Hansen, Brian Walker, Diana Liverman, Katherine Richardson, Paul Crutzen and Jonathan Foley “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity”. *Ecology*

and Society, vol. 14, no. 2, 2009, p. 32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03180-140232>.

Sörlin, Sverker. "Environmental Humanities: Why Should Biologists Interested in the Environment Take the Humanities Seriously?". *Bioscience*, vol. 62, no. 9, 2012, pp. 788-789. DOI: doi.org/10.1525/bio.2012.62.9.2

Wagner, Peter. *Progress: A Reconstruction*. Polity Press, 2016.

Zabala, Santiago. *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

L'apport de la littérature à la composition d'un "monde commun": Die Wand de Marlen Haushofer et Minotaurus de Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Aurélie Choné
Université de Strasbourg, France
achone@unistra.fr

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4714>



Résumé

Dans le contexte actuel de la crise écologique et de la pandémie de Covid-19, alors qu'il est nécessaire de "repenser les rapports entre humains et non-humains" (Philippe Descola), cet article propose une relecture comparée de deux œuvres issues de la littérature de langue allemande, parues à douze ans d'intervalle, en pleine guerre froide, *Die Wand* (1963) de l'auteure autrichienne Marlen Haushofer, et *Minotaurus: Eine Ballade* (1985) de l'écrivain suisse Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Je m'intéresserai dans ces récits à ce qui fait et défait les collectifs, à ce que Marielle Macé a appelé la "grammaire des attachements". Comment s'exprime par les mots, notamment les pronoms personnels, le travail qui consiste à se nouer les uns aux autres, et ces liens se nouent-ils de façon juste ? Les deux ouvrages étudiés parviennent-ils à définir un "nous", à faire émerger une communauté des organismes vivants, humains et non-humains ? L'article s'interrogera sur l'apport de la littérature à la "composition d'un monde commun" (Bruno Latour), en se demandant si les scénarii proposés dans les deux œuvres rendent possible un "espoir actif" (Joanna Macy), et ce qu'ils nous apprennent sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature à l'heure des grands bouleversements écologiques.

Mots clés: Monde commun, littérature, humains, non humains, rapport nature/culture, écocritique, *Die Wand*, Haushofer, *Minotaurus*, Dürrenmatt

Abstract

In the context of the current environmental crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, as it is becoming increasingly urgent to "rethink the relationships between human and non-human beings" (Philippe Descola), this paper offers a comparative reading of two works of German-language literature, both published, within a space of twelve years, during the Cold War: *Die Wand* (1963) by Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer and *Minotaurus: Eine Ballade* (1985) by Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. In these two narratives, I will focus on the way communities are made and unmade, on what Marielle Macé has defined as "the grammar of attachments". How do words, especially personal pronouns, convey the process by which beings connect one to the other, and are the connections made solid and harmonious ones? Do these two works manage to give rise to a community of living, human and non-human entities? This paper will examine the role of literature in building "a common world" (Bruno Latour), asking whether the scripts outlined in the two books can raise "active hope" (Joanna Macy) and what they teach us about the history of the concept of nature in a time of great environmental change.

Keywords: Common world, literature, humans, non-humans, nature/culture, ecocriticism, *The Wall*, Haushofer, *Minotaurus*, Dürrenmatt.

Resumen

En el contexto actual de la crisis ecológica y de la pandemia de Covid-19, en un momento en el que es necesario "repensar la relación entre los humanos y los no humanos" (Philippe Descola), este artículo

propone una relectura comparada de dos obras de la literatura en lengua alemana, publicadas con doce años de diferencia, en plena Guerra Fría, *El muro* (1963) de la autora austriaca Marlen Haushofer, y *Minotaure: Una balada* (1985) del escritor suizo Friedrich Dürrenmatt. En estas historias me interesaré por lo que hace y deshace los colectivos, por lo que Marielle Macé ha llamado la "gramática de los apegos". ¿Cómo se expresa con palabras el trabajo de vinculación con los demás, sobre todo con pronombres personales, y se vinculan de forma correcta? ¿Logran las dos obras estudiadas definir un "nosotros", poner de manifiesto una comunidad de organismos vivos, humanos y no humanos? El artículo examinará la contribución de la literatura a la "composición de un mundo común" (Bruno Latour), preguntándose si los escenarios propuestos en las dos obras hacen posible una "esperanza activa" (Joanna Macy), y lo que nos enseñan sobre la historia de la idea de naturaleza en una época de gran agitación ecológica.

Palabras clave: Mundo común, literatura, humanos, no humanos, naturaleza/cultura, ecocrítica, *El muro*, Haushofer, Minotaure, Dürrenmatt

Selon l'anthropologue Philippe Descola, il est nécessaire de "repenser les rapports entre humains et non-humains" (Lecompte et Descola). La pandémie de Covid-19 est selon lui l'occasion de remettre en cause les liens que les Occidentaux entretiennent avec la nature et d'imaginer de nouvelles formes de société, de "vivre ensemble" dans un "monde commun". Le sociologue et philosophe Bruno Latour est d'avis que ce "monde commun" n'existe pas a priori: "il faut le composer" grâce à une réflexion politique qui reprend "depuis le début le mouvement de composition" (Latour). La littérature, loin d'être hors du champ politique, peut à mon sens apporter une contribution importante, et même essentielle, à la réflexion des "arts politiques"¹ sur ce mouvement de composition du "monde commun"—et ce pour plusieurs raisons.

D'abord, le poids des formations discursives, des non-dits et des idéologies pèse souvent très lourd dans ce qui est admis à faire partie du monde commun et ce qui en est rejeté. Comme la littérature travaille avec la langue, elle est particulièrement à même de mettre en lumière ces non-dits et de trouver des solutions qui passent par le langage. En outre, la littérature se nourrissant aux sources de l'imaginaire, elle est également susceptible d'imaginer des scénarii et des narrations utiles à la réflexion et à la résilience. En effet nous avons tous besoin de récits pour vivre, comme l'ont montré de nombreux travaux dans le domaine de l'éco-narration² et de la résilience littéraire—et ce d'autant plus dans un monde où la vulnérabilité et l'incertitude (Caeymaex, Despret et Pieront) deviennent omniprésentes. Enfin, en revenant à la singularité de l'expérience subjective, tout en étant foncièrement intersubjective³, la littérature permet de donner du sens à la crise environnementale, et de poser la question éthique de la responsabilité.

Depuis l'émergence d'une prise de conscience environnementale, en particulier depuis les années 1960, à une époque où s'élèvent de plus en plus de murs, visibles ou

¹ Une École des Arts Politiques a été fondée à Sciences Po Paris (SPEAP) en automne 2010.

² Je renvoie par exemple au programme de recherche "L'éco-narration comme construction du sens à l'ère de l'incertitude" de l'Université de Montpellier, où ont été organisés lors du premier confinement des ateliers d'écriture avec les étudiants, sur les liens entre écologie et pandémie, et où la narration a été envisagée comme facteur de résilience et de sollicitude.

³ Comme l'écrivait déjà Germaine de Staël, le génie est de pouvoir exprimer le commun à travers le singulier de la subjectivité.

invisibles, entre les espèces, entre les humains et entre les territoires, la littérature évoque et met en scène diverses (im)possibilités de communautés réunissant "humains" et "non-humains" (pour reprendre les termes de Descola). C'est pourquoi elle est susceptible d'apporter des enseignements riches de sens sur ce qui est—ou non—faisable et souhaitable, pour l'avenir. Que nous disent les œuvres littéraires sur les liens entre humains et non humains? Comment ces liens s'inscrivent-ils dans un espace, dans un paysage? Et que nous dit cet espace sur la nature, et le rapport nature/culture? Voilà des questions qui guident la démarche écocritique dans laquelle je m'insère ici, et qui rejoignent les préoccupations actuelles des humanités environnementales.

Je me pencherai sur deux œuvres issues de la littérature de langue allemande, parues à douze ans d'intervalle, en pleine guerre froide, *Die Wand* (1963) de l'auteure autrichienne Marlen Haushofer, roman paru une décennie avant que l'écologie politique s'affirme en tant que courant de pensée et mouvement militant cherchant à repenser les interactions entre les êtres humains et leur environnement, et *Minotaurus: Eine Ballade* (1985) de l'écrivain suisse Friedrich Dürrenmatt, paru un an avant la catastrophe de Tchernobyl en 1986. Je m'intéresserai dans ces récits à ce qui fait et défait les collectifs, à ce que Marielle Macé a appelé la "grammaire des attachements" (Macé, "Place Syntagma"). Comment s'exprime par les mots, notamment les pronoms personnels, le travail qui consiste à se nouer les uns aux autres, et les liens se nouent-ils de façon juste? Les deux ouvrages étudiés parviennent-ils à définir un "nous" par-delà le "je" et le "tu", à faire émerger une communauté des organismes vivants, quelle que soit leur espèce? La tentative de chacun des protagonistes principaux—le Minotaure et la femme (non nommée)—de créer un "monde commun" se solde-t-elle par une réussite ou un échec? Les scénarii proposés rendent-il possible un espoir actif au sens de la militante écologiste Joanna Macy, et que nous apprennent-ils sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature à l'heure des grands bouleversements écologiques?

Pour "repenser les rapports entre humains et non-humains", il convient sans doute de commencer par percevoir le pluriel des formes de vie. Qualifier ces formes d'humaines et de non humaines pose déjà en soi question à un niveau politique, au sens où le critère de référence premier semble être l'humain, duquel se détacherait ce qui n'est pas humain, le non humain. C'est la raison pour laquelle certains préfèrent parler des "vivants" dans leur ensemble, ou encore des "existants" (qui sont selon Florence Burgat plus que de "simples vivants"⁴)—ce qui a l'avantage de ne pas retenir l'humain comme étalon de distribution. Plutôt que des "vivants non humains", d'autres préfèrent parler des "autres qu'humains", ou des vivants "autres qu'humains", des "vivants visibles et invisibles", au sens où on ne voit pas les virus, les bactéries, ou encore les animaux sauvages, qui sont perçus par les humains sur le mode de l'apparition-disparition, du surgissement. On saisit d'emblée à quel point la question de la formulation, de la langue donc, est importante. Marielle Macé a pointé l'enjeu politique de l'utilisation des pronoms personnels, en particulier du pronom "nous", qui permet de distribuer des cercles d'appartenance

⁴ Concernant cette distinction, voir Burgat, *Liberté et inquiétude* (2006) et *La condition animale. Une autre existence* (2012).

multiples (par exemple les vivants, les vivants humains, les vivants humains féminins) et pose ce-faisant la question de l'identité: à quelle communauté, à quels cercles est-ce que j'appartiens? Et puis-je échapper à cette communauté, à ces cercles d'appartenance?

Notons, avec Marielle Macé, que le pronom "nous" n'est pas le pluriel du pronom "je", et que le "je" n'est pas dans le "nous". Le "nous" est une autre manière d'être à plusieurs. Dans son livre *Nous* (2016), Tristan Garcia cite le linguiste Emile Benvéniste: sa définition du "nous" pose la question du sujet collectif, en montrant que le "nous" n'est pas l'agrégat de je; on ne peut pas dire "je" ensemble, parler ensemble; on parle à tour de rôle. Le pronom "nous" opère selon lui une jonction entre le "je" et le "non-je". La détermination de ce "non-je" se dérobe; quelque chose dans le "nous" s'illimite: "Nous' ne désigne pas une addition de sujets ("je" plus "je"...) mais un sujet collectif, dilaté autour de moi qui parle: moi et du non-moi, en partie indéfini, potentiellement illimité, moi et tout ce à quoi je peux ou veux bien me relier" (Macé, *Nos Cabanes* 20). L'attention à la langue dans les deux œuvres étudiées permettra de détecter des formules d'inclusion ou d'exclusion à une "communauté des vivants", à la frontière de la linguistique et de la politique. Car les deux œuvres ont en commun l'utilisation massive des pronoms personnels "je", "tu", "il", "elle" et "nous".

Et ce n'est pas le seul point commun entre ces deux ouvrages que rien ne semble a priori relier. D'abord il s'agit de récits existentiels sur la condition humaine elle-même; la solitude, l'incompréhension, l'incommunicabilité et la peur constituent les conditions de l'expérience humaine. Ensuite, ce sont des récits sur le lien de l'humain au non humain, en particulier à l'animal (y compris à sa propre animalité), et, de manière plus générale, à la nature. En outre, ces récits ont un cadre similaire: un lieu clos, qui provoque une sensation d'étouffement et d'isolement. Aussi bien le Minotaure dans la ballade de Dürrenmatt que la femme dans le roman de Haushofer sont enfermés dans un espace délimité par des murs en verre invisibles, transparents ou réfléchissants: le labyrinthe d'un côté, l'espace qui entoure la cabane (*Jagdhütte*) de l'autre. Avec, au-dessus d'eux, le ciel, le soleil et la lune, l'air libre. Les deux œuvres mettent en scène une figure solitaire et "confinée"⁵: le Minotaure et la femme. Elles se terminent toutes deux par une attaque brutale de l'extérieur, incompréhensible par le/la protagoniste principal·e. L'agresseur est chaque fois un homme et son acte est d'une incroyable barbarie: Thésée poignarde le Minotaure dans le dos en le dupant grâce à un masque de minotaure, tandis que l'inconnu qui surgit à la fin de *Die Wand* abat le chien et le taureau de la femme à coups de hache.

La dénomination des personnages principaux est révélatrice: le Minotaure, la femme. Aucun d'eux n'a de nom. Ce sont des types au sens d'archétypes, ou des espèces un peu comme les espèces animales: l'oiseau, le poisson... A contrario certains animaux sont nommés dans *Die Wand*, comme le chien Luchs, le chat Tiger et la vache Bella; d'autres ne le sont pas, comme le taureau (*der Stier*). Le critère du nom propre n'est donc pas valable pour distinguer l'humain de l'animal—ce qui contribue à l'effacement des frontières qui les séparaient jusque-là. D'autres moyens contribuent à cet effacement,

⁵ Je reprends ici à dessein un terme à la mode en France depuis les derniers "confinements" imposés par le gouvernement français dans le contexte de la crise sanitaire de la Covid-19.

comme l'utilisation des pronoms personnels neutre "es" (pour *das Monster* ou *das Wesen*) ou masculin "er" à propos du Minotaure, et du pronom "es" pour la jeune fille (*das Mädchen*). Mentionnons aussi l'utilisation de termes habituellement réservés aux humains pour décrire les animaux. Ainsi Bella est comparée à une jeune femme gracieuse et coquette avec ses grands yeux bruns. Mais c'est dans la relation au chien Luchs que le mur entre humain et animal finit par disparaître complètement: parfois, la femme a l'impression que Luchs va se mettre à parler⁶; elle en oublie complètement qu'il est un chien et elle un être humain.⁷ La femme et le chien vivent véritablement dans un monde commun; ils ont développé un langage commun, non verbale mais tout aussi efficace.

Dans les deux œuvres, les protagonistes principaux se meuvent dans un espace réduit. Cette réduction drastique de l'espace nous est particulièrement proche depuis notre expérience du confinement—au moins en France, où les déplacements ont été autorisés pendant plusieurs semaines seulement à 1 km autour de son domicile⁸; on mesure aujourd'hui à quel point notre propre vulnérabilité croît dans un lieu de confinement. On prend aussi conscience de la vulnérabilité que l'on partage avec les animaux et de notre co-dépendance: la vache aux pies engorgées qui supplie la femme de la traire, le chat affamé et grelottant qui gémit devant sa porte, le veau nouveau-né livré aux bons soins de sa mère... Aussitôt qu'un autre être vivant apparaît dans notre lieu de vie, nous sommes à la recherche d'une connivence, d'un dialogue; un jeu d'approche, de regard, commence à s'établir; au-delà de la suspicion, il y a envie de contact, besoin de liens, désir de partage. À plusieurs reprises, des vivants surgissent dans la "prison" des protagonistes; leur appartenance à un sexe et une espèce aura une influence primordiale sur le déroulement de la rencontre et son issue, sur la construction ou non d'un monde commun.

Dans les deux œuvres, le lieu de l'action est clos et entouré de murs en verre, un matériau extrêmement dur, cristallisé, froid, à l'opposé de la matière vivante, mouvante, vibrante et palpitante. Dans *Minotaurus*, le miroir semble être le reflet de ce que l'homme a infligé au monde animal; la solitude de l'animal enfermé fait écho à l'isolement de l'homme confiné. Dans *Die Wand*, la femme décrit le mur comme quelque chose d'invisible, de lisse et de froid. Partout où elle regarde à travers ce mur incassable, la femme découvre la mort: le couple de personnes âgées, le bûcheron—tout est figé, statique. Seule la nature végétale est encore vivante: " Si l'homme près de la pompe était mort, et je ne pouvais plus en douter, tous les gens de la vallée devaient être morts aussi et non seulement les gens, mais tout ce qui avait été vivant. Dans la prairie n'étaient restés en vie que l'herbe et les arbres; le feuillage nouveau se déployait, éblouissant dans la

⁶ "Manchmal bildete ich mir ein, dass Luchs, wären ihm plötzlich Hände gewachsen, bald auch zu denken und zu reden angefangen hätte" (DW, 111).

⁷ "In jenem Sommer vergass ich ganz, dass Luchs ein Hund war und ich ein Mensch" (DW 217).

⁸ Le 23 mars 2020, le Premier ministre, Édouard Philippe, expliquait au *20 Heures* de TF1: "Sortir pour promener ses enfants ou pour faire du sport, ça doit être dans un rayon d'un km de chez soi au maximum, pour une heure, et évidemment tout seul, et une fois par jour." La règle des 1 km pour les déplacements de loisirs est de nouveau entrée en vigueur le 28 octobre 2020.

lumière" (MI 28).⁹ Faut-il interpréter le fait qu'au-delà du mur les humains sont morts, pétrifiés, alors que les arbres et les plantes continuent à vivre, comme une vengeance de la nature sur les êtres humains qui l'ont maltraitée depuis des siècles, ainsi que certains ont pu interpréter la pandémie causée par la covid-19?¹⁰

Mais tandis que même les murs intérieurs sont des miroirs dans le labyrinthe de *Minotaurus*, en faisant le lieu inhabitable par excellence, l'espace clos dans *Die Wand* contient deux lieux habitables, que ce soit la cabane de chasse (*Jagdhütte*) en pleine forêt ou la cabane située sur la prairie d'altitude (*Alm*). Leur matériau de construction, le bois, en fait des lieux de vie plus chaleureux que le labyrinthe de verre; tandis que le contact avec le vivant est très rare dans le labyrinthe de *Minotaurus* (seulement ici ou là des oiseaux ou des êtres humains perdus, apeurés ou violents), il est omniprésent dans le chalet et la cabane de *Die Wand*, notamment à travers l'ouïe, le bruit du vent, de la pluie qui tombe, du feu qui crépite dans l'âtre. La présence du végétal contribue à adoucir le quotidien et calmer la peur. Il n'est pas anodin que la femme, irritée de ne pas visualiser le périmètre du mur, le marque au moyen de branchages.¹¹ Elle se sent aussi protégée dans la forêt qui entoure le chalet, et n'hésite pas à manger de la verdure, des orties par exemple.¹² Dans le garage transformé en étable, la naissance du veau est attendue dans une atmosphère accueillante, tamisée. Et même si le labyrinthe a été construit pour enfermer le Minotaure, comme une prison davantage que comme une maison donc, il n'en protège pas moins l'homme-taureau des agressions extérieures; il peut y dormir et rêver: "La maison natale est plus qu'un corps de logis, elle est un corps de songes" (Bachelard, *La Poétique* 33). Tandis que le Minotaure rêve de la fille aux cheveux noirs, la femme rêve d'animaux, et même de donner naissance à divers animaux. La maison invite donc à rêver, aussitôt que les protagonistes sont au repos.¹³

Ainsi, la représentation de l'espace est construite dans les deux œuvres sur l'opposition entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur. *Die Wand* introduit toutefois une verticalité absente de *Minotaurus*, à travers l'opposition entre la forêt autour du chalet de chasse (*Jagdhütte*), en bas dans la vallée, et l'alpage (*Alm*), en haut. Le premier été passé sur la prairie alpine représente pour la femme une expérience inoubliable: sa présence aux éléments, au soleil, aux étoiles dans le firmament, à l'herbe, au paysage, fait littéralement advenir le monde; le vide et la mort au-delà du mur n'existent plus:

Quelque chose de nouveau commençait. J'ignorais ce que cela m'apporterait, mais ma nostalgie et mon inquiétude pour l'avenir se détachaient lentement de moi. Je contemplai l'étendue des pâturages, la bordure du bois au-dessus, la voûte du ciel à l'ouest de laquelle

⁹ "Wenn der Mann am Brunnen tot war, und daran konnte ich nicht mehr zweifeln, mussten alle Menschen im Tal tot sein, und nicht nur die Menschen, alles was lebend gewesen war. Nur das Gras auf den Wiesen lebte, das Gras und die Bäume; das junge Laub spreizte sich glänzend im Licht" (DW 21).

¹⁰ "Corona ist die Rache der Natur am Menschen." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 décembre 2020.

¹¹ "Es störte mich, dass ich die Wand nicht sehen konnte, und so brach ich einen Arm voll Haselzweige ab und fing an, sie an der Wand in die Erde zu stecken" (DW 20).

¹² "Ich habe mich nie nachts im Wald gefürchtet, während ich in der Stadt immer ängstlich war. Warum das so war, weiß ich nicht, wahrscheinlich weil ich nie daran dachte, dass ich auch im Wald auf Menschen treffen könnte" (DW 57).

¹³ C'est ce que Bachelard appelle la "maison onirique" dans *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*. José Corti, 1948, pp. 95-128.

était déjà accroché le cercle pâle de la lune en même temps qu'à l'est le soleil se levait. L'air rude me forçait à respirer profondément. Je commençais à trouver beau l'alpage; étranger et dangereux mais plein d'attrait comme tout ce qui est étranger [...]. (MI 219)¹⁴

La femme se relie au cosmos et enjambe ainsi pour un court instant tous les abîmes qui existent près d'elle. L'émotion esthétique qui la submerge sur l'alpage est inséparable d'une prise de conscience de son appartenance à la nature, et même si elle s'arrache assez rapidement à cette vision envoutante pour nettoyer de fond en comble la cabane qui lui servira d'abri pour la nuit, cette expérience esthétique contient déjà en germe une éthique de la terre au sens où elle a une valeur éthique et existentielle: "Faire des cabanes, écrit Marielle Macé, c'est imaginer des façons de vivre dans un monde abimé" (Macé, *Nos cabanes* 27). C'est aussi sentir son appartenance à la communauté biotique et le lien profond qui nous unit aux autres vivants. Le moi de la femme se dilate pour englober un nous quasiment cosmique. Bien qu'ils soient également présents dans *Minotaurus*, le soleil et la lune restent extérieurs au Minotaure; ils ne rentrent pas véritablement dans son champ de perception.

Si ce séjour en altitude a été si propice à l'épanouissement de la femme, à son habitation heureuse de la terre, c'est aussi et surtout grâce à la présence permanente de son chien Luchs, qui lui apporte chaleur et affection, c'est-à-dire la lumière au sens étymologique du mot latin *lux*. Non seulement Luchs est un fidèle compagnon¹⁵, mais il est pour la femme un être unique, irremplaçable, car aimant. Au fil du temps, d'autres compagnons rejoignent la femme dans son lieu de confinement. Dans cet espace partagé avec les autres animaux, un nouveau collectif émerge peu à peu, un "nous", une nouvelle famille composée d'humains et de non humains: "Mes animaux étaient tout ce qui me restait et je commençais à me sentir le chef de notre étrange famille" (MI 61).¹⁶ La femme considère Bella comme une sœur¹⁷ et souligne que le chat est fait de la "même étoffe"¹⁸ qu'elle. Ce qui sauve la femme, c'est son lien aux êtres vivants qui trouvent refuge près d'elle (*die Kuh, der Stier, die Katzen*), et dont elle prend soin comme s'il s'agissait de ses propres enfants. Le contact est très physique, notamment par l'odorat¹⁹ qui est le sens le plus primitif (Le Breton); la chaleur partagée, donnée ou reçue, est autant corporelle qu'affective. Le déterminant possessif *Meine* témoigne de l'appartenance à une nouvelle famille, à un monde commun incluant l'ensemble des vivants. Les animaux sauvages sont également intégrés dans cette communauté biotique; ainsi, la femme tente d'aider les

¹⁴ Etwas Neues fing an. Ich wusste nicht, was es mir bringen würde, aber mein Heimweh und die Sorge im die Zukunft wichen langsam von mir. Ich sah die Flächen der Almmatten, dahinter einen streifen Wald und darüber den großen gewölbten Himmelbogen, an dessen westlichem Rand der Mond als blasser Kreis hing, während im Osten die Sonne emporstieg. Die Luft war scharf und zwang zu tieferem Atmen. Ich fing an, die Alm schön zu finden (...). (DW 175)

¹⁵ Au sens de Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifest. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*.

¹⁶ "Ich hatte ja nur noch die Tiere, und ich fing an, mich als Oberhaupt unserer merkwürdigen Familie zu fühlen" (DW 47).

¹⁷ "Nach allem, was wir gemeinsam erlebt haben ist Bella mehr als meine Kuh geworden, eine arme geduldige Schwester, die ihr Los mit mehr Würde trägt als ich" (DW 234).

¹⁸ "Die Katze und ich waren aus dem gleichen Stoff (...)" (DW 201).

¹⁹ "meine Tiere hingen an meinem vertrauten Geruch" (DW 231).

biches et les cerfs—qu'elle appelle avec affection "mes biches et mes cerfs"²⁰—à survivre quand les attaques de l'hiver deviennent trop rudes. Elle ressent profondément que leur survie est une composante de sa propre survie, ou dit de manière plus positive, de son propre épanouissement.²¹

Dans *Die Wand*, le lien qui noue les uns aux autres se fait de façon souvent inattendue, quoique juste; c'est chaque fois comme un surgissement: l'arrivée de la vache, la naissance du taureau, l'apparition de tel ou tel chat. La rupture du lien qui dénoue les vivants est souvent tout aussi brutale; la mort est une violence cruelle bien que compréhensible car indissociable de la nature—à l'instar de la mort du chat blanc attaqué la nuit par une bête sauvage—tandis que le meurtre, lui, est incompréhensible, et impardonnable: le taureau et le chien fracassés à coups de hache—sans raison. La femme confinée de force, comme nous l'avons été il y a peu, est dans l'incapacité de se projeter, de se dilater, en raison du mur. Une tristesse insondable l'envahit. Les liens établis entre les vivants expriment la tentative de mise en commun des solitudes. Le "nous", "c'est l'histoire de ceux qui seuls ont décidé de ne pas être seuls" (Macé, "Place Syntagma").

Ce lien est impossible dans *Minotaurus*. Dès qu'il veut se nouer, il est coupé, brutalement. À chaque fois qu'un autre être vivant surgit dans le labyrinthe, le Minotaure se réjouit à l'idée de s'en faire un ami et exprime son espérance par la danse. Le même processus se reproduit à trois reprises, d'abord avec la jeune femme, puis avec un groupe de jeunes gens, et enfin avec Thésée (qui n'est nommé qu'à la fin de l'ouvrage). Quand il voit la jeune fille et se met à danser dans le labyrinthe, ce pas de deux, à travers le jeu des pronoms personnels "er" et "es", des parallélismes et des répétitions, évoque un peu la danse de la bête et de la belle dans le célèbre conte, si ce n'est qu'il finit tragiquement:

Il dansa sa difformité, elle dansa sa beauté, il dansa sa joie de l'avoir trouvée, elle dansa sa peur d'avoir été trouvée, il dansa sa délivrance, et elle dansa son destin, il dansa son désir, et elle dansa sa curiosité, il dansa son approche, elle dansa sa dérobade, il dansa sa pénétration, elle dansa son enlacement. (M 71)²²

Le Minotaure n'arrive pas à se lier à la jeune femme. Alors qu'il n'était qu'une chose monstrueuse au début du récit ("es"), il devient un être genré ("er") qui pénètre la fille, laquelle reste quant à elle l'objet ("es") de son désir. Celui-ci l'aveugle littéralement puisqu'il ne remarque même pas qu'il la tue en s'unissant à elle. À la vue de Thésée, il espère à nouveau trouver un ami: "Il dansa la danse de la fraternité, la danse de l'amitié, la danse du bien-être, la danse de l'amour, la danse de la proximité, la danse de la chaleur" (M 85).²³ Mais cette fois, c'est lui qui est tué. La danse est chaque fois un moment de joie

²⁰ "Meine Rehe und Hirsche" (DW 102).

²¹ "Es rächt sich jetzt, daß alles Raubzeug längst ausgerottet worden ist und das Wild außer dem Menschen keinen natürlichen Feind mehr hat" (DW 102).

²² Er tanzte seine Ungestalt, es tanzte seine Schönheit, er tanzte seine Freude, es gefunden zu haben, es tanzte seine Furcht, von ihm gefunden worden zu sein, er tanzte seine Erlösung, und es tanzte sein Schicksal, er tanzte seine Gier, und es tanzte seine Neugier, ertanzte sein Herandrängen, und es tanzte sein Abdrängen, er tanzte sein Eindringen, es tanzte sein Umschlingen. (M 18-19)

²³ Der Minotaurus schrie auf, wenn es auch mehr ein (...) Aufjaulen vor Freude darüber, daß er nicht mehr der Einzelne war, der zugleich Aus- und Eingeschlossene, daß es eine zweiten Minotaurus gab, nicht nur sein Ich, sondern ein Du. Der Minotaurus begann zu tanzen. Er tanzte den Tanz der Brüderlichkeit, den Tanz

et d'espérance. Mais dans le premier cas, le Minotaure est victime de sa propre animalité. Dans le second, il est trahi par celui qu'il croyait être un ami²⁴: le récit culmine dans cette confiance trompée. Cette trahison peut être interprétée comme l'exclusion de l'animal du monde commun, laquelle scelle de facto la solitude de l'homme, et au final sa mort. L'impossible rencontre inter-spécifique est tragique pour l'humanité, vouée à dépérir de l'absence de liens.

Dans les deux cas, le récit se termine dans un bain de sang. Dans *Minotaurus*, l'inextricable conflit entre l'homme et l'animal se double d'une guerre des sexes: la jeune femme est tuée dans le labyrinthe; on sait aussi qu'Ariane sera abandonnée par Thésée malgré l'aide qu'elle lui apporte. *Die Wand* thématise également la brutalité de l'homme envers la femme. Les lectures écoféministes de l'ouvrage ont été nombreuses à mettre l'accent sur le parallélisme entre la nature avilie et la femme violée, entre la conquête de la terre (dans une démarche impérialiste et colonialiste) et la possession de la femme, ou encore entre la femme opprimée et l'animal exploité.²⁵ Le masculin est exclu du monde dans lequel s'est repliée la femme, comme s'il avait été responsable de la catastrophe ayant eu lieu au-delà du mur. Dans le monde d'avant régnaient des valeurs patriarcales comme le progrès, la science et le pouvoir. Ce monde masculin violent a visiblement mené à la catastrophe et s'oppose à l'espace intra-muros où prévalent des valeurs généralement considérées comme plus féminines tels que la vulnérabilité et le soin (*care*).

Dans *Minotaurus*, le monde extérieur dans lequel la faute de la femme (en l'occurrence la reine Pasiphaé, épouse de Minos, roi de Crète) doit être expiée par l'emprisonnement de son enfant dans un labyrinthe construit par un homme, qui plus est criminel (Dédale)²⁶, s'oppose au monde de l'enfance, de la danse, de la spontanéité et de la naïveté. Les lignes de partage sont nettes: entre l'homme et l'animal dans *Minotaurus*, à travers la malédiction de leur incommunicabilité; entre l'homme et la femme dans *Die Wand*, à travers l'omniprésence de la peur: si la femme se barricade dans sa maison, ce n'est pas par peur des animaux, mais par peur des hommes et de leur violence. Le masculin est exclu du monde commun; la peur des hommes traverse tout le récit, jusqu'à ce qu'éclate cette haine au grand jour, à la fin du roman: trois mâles entrent en collision et s'entretuent: l'homme tue le taureau qui est défendu par le chien qui est tué par l'homme, qui est lui-même tué par la femme. Cet emmêlement rappelle le combat sanglant qui oppose le Minotaure aux jeunes gens et qui se termine par un imbroglio de corps humains et non-humains entremêlés et finalement, par le constat de la haine viscéral qui oppose l'homme à l'animal.²⁷

der Freundschaft, den Tanz der Geborgenheit, den Tanz der Liebe, den Tanz der Nähe, den Tanz der Wärme. Er tanzte sein Glück, er tanzte seine Zweisamkeit, er tanzte seine Erlösung, er tanzte den Untergang des Labyrinths, das donnernde Versinken seiner Wänder und Spiegel in die Erde, er tanzte die Freundschaft zwischen den Minotauern, Tieren, Menschen und Göttern. (M 50)

²⁴ "im Vertrauen darauf, einen Freund gefunden zu haben" (M 50-51).

²⁵ Voir par exemple Richards.

²⁶ Dédale tua son propre élève quand il commença à le dépasser.

²⁷ "Der Haß kam über ihn, den das Tier gegen den Menschen hegt, von dem das Tier gezähmt, mißbraucht, gejagt, geschlachtet, gefressen wird, der Urhaß, der in jedem Tier glimmt" (M 30).

Apparemment la fin des ouvrages ne laisse guère entrevoir d'espoir puisqu'elle donne à penser que la situation va se reproduire autre part, plus tard, sous une autre forme, c'est-à-dire que le problème n'est pas résolu, qu'il faut continuer à vivre avec une épée de Damoclès au-dessus de la tête (rappelons l'époque de la guerre froide durant laquelle sont parus ces ouvrages). Tant que l'homme ne respectera pas la femme, tant qu'il la violera (*Minotaurus*) ou tentera de la tuer (*Die Wand*), l'humanité continuera à détruire son environnement et à s'auto-détruire. Après le meurtre de ses animaux par l'homme alors qu'elle revenait de l'alpage, il est clair pour la femme qu'elle ne pourra plus jamais retourner sur cette prairie²⁸: la séparation entre nature (espace magique et cosmique de la liberté représentée par l'alpage) et culture (lopins de terre cultivés laborieusement autour du chalet) semble définitivement consommée, reproduite au sein du mur. La verticalité présente au début du roman entre la vallée et l'alpage, qui évoquait la polarité entre la cave et le grenier dont parle Bachelard dans la *Poétique de l'espace*, disparaît au profit de la seule cabane de chasse et de la vallée, c'est-à-dire d'une horizontalité qui caractérise aussi *Minotaurus*. Le soleil et la lune, ainsi que les oiseaux qui tournoient au-dessus de la forêt ou du labyrinthe à la fin des deux ouvrages, sont les seuls éléments qui continuent d'évoquer la verticalité.

Tandis que *Minotaurus* met en scène un espace clos artificiel, coupé de l'extérieur et dépourvu de tout élément naturel si ce n'est quelques oiseaux et des humains qui y pénètrent vivants, y meurent et avec lesquels aucune vraie relation ne se noue, *Die Wand* met en scène un espace clos coupé de l'extérieur, un lieu naturel mais dépourvu d'êtres humains (si ce n'est un homme qui surgit de nulle part à la fin du récit), coupé d'un espace extérieur d'où toute vie humaine a disparu. Dans le labyrinthe, aucune relation avec des humains n'est possible autrement que sur le mode conflictuel. De même, la vie relationnelle de la femme, y compris avec ses enfants devenus grands, n'est pas satisfaisante, l'érection du mur ne fait qu'accentuer un sentiment de solitude préexistant. Le problème se situe dans les deux cas dans les liens établis avec les autres, dans le "faire communauté", dans le "faire nous" avec d'autres humains ou des représentants d'autres espèces. Tandis que les miroirs du labyrinthe renvoient à un "faux nous" qui ne renvoie qu'à soi, un "vrai nous" semble pouvoir s'établir dans *Die Wand*.

L'importance politique de trouver la parole juste pour exprimer ce "nous" a été soulignée en introduction. Tant que ce ne sera pas possible, il y a peu d'espoir que les choses s'améliorent de manière notable. Le changement passera par la parole et le langage²⁹, comme le suggère aussi Proust: "J'ai toujours honoré ceux qui défendent la grammaire, ou la logique. On se rend compte cinquante ans après qu'ils ont conjuré de grands périls" (140). Une pensée des liens est nécessaire pour (dé)faire les liens dans la langue, et notamment se défaire des "mauvais nous", ceux qui créent des murs comme dans l'expression "nous et les animaux" (comme si nous n'étions pas des animaux, des primates parmi d'autres) ou encore "nous et les étrangers". Selon Marielle Macé, une grammaire

²⁸ "Die Alm ist für mich verloren, ich werde sie nie mehr betreten" (DW 226).

²⁹ On pourrait faire un parallèle avec l'écriture inclusive qui est la condition (nécessaire, mais pas suffisante) pour une plus grande inclusion des femmes dans le politique.

des liens doit exprimer nos attachements, ce à quoi et à qui l'on tient, ce dont on ne saurait se passer pour protéger notre amour de la vie.³⁰ Des deux œuvres étudiées ressort la même réponse: plus que de biens, d'objets et de ressources, ce sont de liens dont nous avons besoin, de relations au sens large, avec des êtres ou avec le cosmos, avec plus grand que soi.³¹

Ce dont on ne saurait se passer, c'est donc de nourriture, compris au sens large que Corine Pelluchon donne à ce terme dans son ouvrage *Les nourritures. Philosophie du corps politique*. Il ne s'agit pas seulement de nourritures matérielles, mais aussi et surtout de nourritures sociales, de relations aux autres, aux paysages, à nous-mêmes—le lien et le lieu étant intimement liés. En ce sens, les deux œuvres mettent en lumière une phénoménologie de la corporéité³² et du vivre-de, plutôt que du vivre-avec ou contre la nature. D'après Pelluchon, "vivre-de" fait surgir un sujet toujours relationnel, toujours en contact avec les autres humains et non-humains, dans la conscience de l'appartenance à un monde commun et d'une interdépendance vitale. En ce sens l'espoir actif n'est pas absent de ces œuvres: la femme et le Minotaure ne renoncent jamais à chercher le contact avec l'Autre et à exprimer leurs émotions à travers un langage, que ce soit la danse pour le Minotaure ou l'écriture pour la femme.

Peut-être "nous" est-il alors quelque chose comme le pluriel de "seul": il ne se fait pas à partir de nos "je" affirmés ou vacillants, mais à partir de nos solitudes [...] Nous faisons et défaisons des collectifs avec solitudes et non malgré elles. Nous ne nouons rien d'autre, et c'est déjà tellement, que notre égal tremblement, nos égales potentialités. (Macé, *Nos cabanes* 21)

Une autre raison d'espérer, et pas des moindres, c'est "le grand jeu du soleil, de la lune et des étoiles" (MI 262), présent dans les deux récits: en effet, "les murs qui séparent les hommes ne montent pas jusqu'au ciel" (Moghaddassi).

Certes les deux œuvres ne véhiculent pas une vision écologique durable (au sens de *sustainability* ou *Nachhaltigkeit*). Elles soulignent au contraire, chacune à leur façon, la destructivité féroce de l'humain. Mais leur potentiel critique peut justement donner aux lectrices et lecteurs une leçon écologique en éveillant chez elles/eux, grâce à une perspective narrative favorable à l'identification, un sentiment d'injustice, de révolte et d'impuissance face à l'innocence mutilée du minotaure et à la communauté décimée de la femme; en éveillant chez le lectorat la conscience d'appartenir à un monde incluant tous

³⁰ C'est le sens de l'enquête proposée par Bruno Latour pendant le confinement du printemps 2020: mesurer l'impureté de ses attachements et la force de ses désirs. À quoi suis-je prêt à renoncer pour le bien de la planète ?

³¹ On peut renvoyer ici à l'idée "moins de biens, plus de liens", exprimée par l'économiste Paul Ariès, promoteur de la décroissance, dans une interview réalisé par Hervé Kempf. Cf. "Il faut aller vers un mode de vie radicalement nouveau". *Le Monde* du 30 novembre 2005. Url: <https://reporterre.net/Moins-de-biens-plus-de-liens>

³² Je n'ai pas pu développer cet aspect, mais on pourrait montrer en s'appuyant sur des exemples précis que le Minotaure est un être kinesthésique, qui ressent avec tout son corps; il sent par exemple le corps chaud et palpitant de la fille contre lui, qui n'a rien à voir avec le contact du verre. Quant à la femme, elle redescend pour ainsi dire dans son corps en travaillant dur à l'extérieur, en bêchant, coupant du bois, ramassant des baies, ce labeur continu étant certes exténuant, mais en même temps ressourçant car en lien constant avec le rythme des saisons.

les vivants, et par voie de conséquence le désir de mettre fin à la destruction de ce monde commun, la littérature pourrait avoir une action rédemptrice pour la biosphère (Rueckert 84). Quoi qu'il en soit, le bain de sang final est dans les deux cas une indéniable remise en cause de cette histoire que l'on nomme "progrès", à savoir le triomphe de l'Homme sur la nature et ses caprices. Est-ce vraiment un progrès que Thésée tue le Minotaure ? À vrai dire non, car l'un et l'autre sont liés par les liens du sang, interdépendants, et le crime de son demi-frère, de fait une partie de lui-même, ne profitera pas à Thésée. Et est-ce vraiment une régression que la femme soit contrainte de cultiver la terre et de vivre seule avec ses animaux? À y réfléchir non, car sa nouvelle vie, bien que très rude, a plus de sens que sa vie d'avant, dans la mesure où les liens qu'elle entretient avec ses animaux sont plus forts que ceux qui la liaient à ses propres enfants devenus grands. Tandis que *Minotaurus* s'achève par la mort de l'homme-taureau et la victoire de l'intrus, *Die Wand* se termine par la survie de la femme et la mort de l'intrus, donc par une victoire, bien que problématique, difficilement acquise et toujours à reconquérir.

Ce qui est problématique est d'ailleurs justement le fait de penser en termes de victoire, de guerre, de conflit, et non de vivre-ensemble, en commun. L'originalité de *Die Wand* est de remettre en question les hiérarchies traditionnelles pour souligner les influences réciproques (*co-agency*) entre humain, animal et végétal. Ainsi, la forêt transforme littéralement le Moi de la femme, comme s'il y avait inter-pénétration de la femme et du végétal.³³ Ce décentrement rend possible une éthique de la terre (*land ethic*), au sens où la femme commence à "penser comme une forêt", pour reprendre l'expression de Aldo Leopold "Penser comme une montagne". En ralentissant son rythme, la femme peut enfin percevoir tout ce qui vit autour d'elle, en particulier la forêt³⁴. *Die Wand* remet également en question l'opposition humain-animal "pour une pensée d'agencements foncièrement multispécifiques où aucun avantage n'a de sens indépendamment des rapports d'interdépendance"³⁵—ce qui est une façon de voir très actuelle aujourd'hui, mais plutôt en avance sur son temps dans les années 1960 et même 1980. Cela ne veut pas dire une hybridation humain-animal, une animalisation de l'humain ou inversement, même si les deux ouvrages témoignent d'un certain effacement des frontières entre humain et animal et de relations plus horizontales que verticales entre eux. La femme écrit par exemple dans son récit: "Ce n'est pas que je redoute de devenir un animal, cela ne serait pas si terrible, ce qui est terrible, c'est qu'un homme ne peut jamais devenir un animal, il passe à côté de l'animalité pour sombrer dans l'abîme. Je ne veux pas que cela m'arrive" (MI 56).³⁶ Ces "agencements multi-spécifiques" signifient plutôt une interaction constante entre humains et non humains, en d'autres termes une co-agentivité des espèces. Au contact du chat par exemple, toujours sur ses gardes dans la forêt, la femme

³³ "(...) es ist, als fange der Wald an, in mir Wurzeln zu schlagen und mit meinem Hirn seine alten, ewigen Gedanken zu denken" (DW 185).

³⁴ "Seit ich langsamer geworden bin, ist der Wald um mich erst lebendig geworden" (DW 221).

³⁵ Voir Gilbert.

³⁶ "Nicht dass ich fürchtete, ein Tier zu werden... das wäre nicht sehr schlimm, aber ein Mensch kann niemals ein Tier werden, er stürzt am Tier vorüber in einen Abgrund. Ich will nicht, dass mir dies zustößt" (DW 44).

se transforme et devient de plus en plus méfiante.³⁷ Inversement, le chat s'endort paisiblement sous ses caresses.

Les deux récits montrent en tout cas qu'il est difficile de construire un monde commun avec les autres espèces, et au sein de l'espèce humaine avec l'autre genre, et plus difficile encore de décider de ce qui est "commun", notamment d'un espace où habiter ensemble. *Die Wand* décrit bien le geste de repli sur soi visant à se protéger d'agressions potentielles: la femme se barricade dans la pièce principale du chalet afin de mieux pouvoir observer l'extérieur. Le Minotaure, lui, a été exclu d'emblée du monde commun car sa vue même soulève l'effroi et la honte. Les deux œuvres mettent en outre l'accent sur les zones d'ombre, celles qui font mal, en pointant "l'intersectionnalité"³⁸ des problèmes: l'antagonisme nature et culture recoupe les conflits homme/femme et humain/animal. Ils suscitent la réflexion du lecteur/de la lectrice et le/la renvoient au combat avec ses propres démons intérieurs: comment réussir à composer le monde commun si l'on ne s'est pas confronté auparavant à l'Autre en soi, à sa propre part d'ombre? Comment inventer un langage pour dire le "nous", un espace où vivre ensemble, sans murs opposant les uns aux autres?

Ainsi les deux œuvres peuvent être interprétées différemment selon le contexte socio-politique de leur réception: guerre froide³⁹ et condition féminine problématique (Battiston 62) à l'époque de leur parution; crise écologique et pandémie aujourd'hui. Face à un contexte environnemental préoccupant, on peut espérer que ces œuvres invitent les lectrices et lecteurs à prendre un peu de hauteur par rapport aux maux de leur temps, et les aident à "danser avec l'incertitude" (pour reprendre l'expression de Joanna Macy). Le recours à un temps mythique dans *Minotaurus* suggère que la fin du monde n'est sans doute pas pour demain et que les crises et les forces destructrices font partie de l'histoire de l'humanité depuis la nuit des temps. Dans sa dystopie, Haushofer oppose elle aussi le temporel en bas (chalet, forêt, champs cultivés) à l'atemporel en haut (alpage et voûte céleste). C'est la temporalité qui l'emporte à la fin du roman puisque la femme décide de vivre en bas dans la forêt, dans un lieu où nature et culture sont compatibles pour elle.⁴⁰ L'écriture—en tant qu'activité créatrice négentropique⁴¹—accompagne ce processus de résilience, comme la danse aurait pu le faire pour le Minotaure s'il n'avait pas été tué par Thésée. Ainsi, les deux œuvres n'alimentent pas la nostalgie pour un âge d'or telle qu'elle peut se manifester aujourd'hui dans une forme de détresse psychique causée par les changements environnementaux, appelée "solastalgie" ou "éco-anxiété" (Albrecht). L'idée que "c'était mieux avant" en est absente puisque la référence à un temps hors du temps rappelle que le conflit et la violence ont toujours existé. Ce n'est pas, à mes yeux, une façon

³⁷ "ich bin misstraurisch geworden wie meine Katze" (DW 132).

³⁸ À propos du concept d'intersectionnalité, créé par Kimberlé Crenshaw, voir Crenshaw.

³⁹ Dürrenmatt était habité dès son plus jeune âge par diverses craintes au sujet du monde moderne, notamment la course aux armements dans les deux blocs. L'idée de catastrophe, d'apocalypse, traverse toute son œuvre picturale.

⁴⁰ "Hier, im Wald, bin ich eigentlich auf dem mir angemessenen Platz" (DW 222).

⁴¹ "Ich schreibe nicht aus Freude am Schreiben; es hat sich eben so für mich ergeben, daß ich schreiben muß, wenn ich nicht den Verstand verlieren will" (DW 7).

de relativiser la situation actuelle, mais au contraire de mettre en lumière ce qu'elle peut avoir de porteur pour un renouveau au sens premier du terme "apocalypse", révéler, dévoiler, en levant le voile sur autre chose—condition pour qu'un autre monde soit possible, ou au moins "une autre fin du monde" (Servigne).

Article reçu 20 février 2022 Article lu et accepté pour publication 12 novembre 2022

Œuvres citées

- Albrecht, Glenn. "Solastalgia' A New Concept in Health and Identity." *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 3, 2005, pp. 44-59.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *La Poétique de l'espace*. Presses universitaires de France, 1957.
- . *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*. José Corti, 1948.
- Battiston, Régine. "Marlen Haushofer: écrire pour transcender sa condition de femme." *Germanica*, vol. 46, 2010, pp. 61-72.
- Burgat, Florence. *La condition animale. Une autre existence*. Albin Michel, 2012.
- . *Liberté et inquiétude*. Kimé, 2006.
- Caeymaex, Florence, Vinciane Despret et Julien Pieront, éditeurs. *Habiter le trouble avec Donna Haraway*. Dehors, 2019.
- "Corona ist die Rache der Natur am Menschen." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 décembre 2020.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. The New Press, 2017.
- Descola, Philippe. *Par-delà nature et culture*. Gallimard, 2005.
- Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. *Minotaure*. Traduit par M. Leyraz. Éditions de Fallois, 1990.
- . *Minotaurus. Eine Ballade. Mit Zeichnungen des Autors*. Diogenes Verlag, 1985.
- Garcia, Tristan. *Nous*. Grasset, 2016.
- Gigliardi, Pasquale et Bruno Latour, éditeurs. *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue pour un monde commun*. Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2006.
- Gilbert, Scott F., Jan Sapp et Alfred I. Tauber. "A symbiotic View of Life: We have Never Been Individuals." *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 87, no. 4, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 325-341.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifest. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- Haushofer, Marlen. *Die Wand*. 1963. Ullstein, 2019.
- . *Le mur invisible*. Traduit par L. Bodo et J. Chambon, Actes sud, 2014.
- Kempf, Hervé. "Il faut aller vers un mode de vie radicalement nouveau." *Le Monde*, 30 novembre 2005. Url: <https://reporterre.net/Moins-de-biens-plus-de-liens>
- Latour, Bruno. "Il n'y a pas de monde commun: il faut le composer." *Association Multitudes*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2011, pp. 38-41.
- , Franck Damour, François Euvé et Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus. "Composer un monde commun." *Études*, vol 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 69-78.
- Le Breton, David. *La Saveur du monde. Une anthropologie des sens*. Métailié, 2006.

- Lecompte, Francis et Philippe Descola. "Il faut repenser les rapports entre humains et non-humains." *CNRS Le journal*, juin 2020. Covid-19: la recherche mobilisée, url: <https://lejournale.cnr.fr/articles/philippe-descola-il-faut-repenser-les-rapports-entre-humains-et-non-humains>.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanach*. Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Macé, Marielle. *Nos cabanes*. Verdier, 2019.
- . "Place Syntagma – grammaire des attachements." Séminaire "Formes de vies et Expressivité", 30 novembre 2020.
- Macy, Joanna et Chris Johnstone. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*. New World Library, 2012.
- Moghaddassi, Reza. *Les murs qui séparent les hommes ne montent pas jusqu'au ciel*. Marabout, 2021.
- Pelluchon, Corine. *Les nourritures. Philosophie du corps politique*. Albin Michel, 2015.
- Proust, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu, Le Temps retrouvé* (1). Gallimard, 1927.
- Richards, Anna. "'The Friendship of Our Distant Relations': Feminism and Animal Families in Marlen Haushofer's *Die Wand* (1963)." *Feminist German Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, University of Nebraska Press, 2020, pp. 75-100, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5250/femigerstud.36.2.0075>.
- Rueckert, William H. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in ecocriticism." *The Iowa Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 71-86.
- Servigne, Pablo, Raphaël Stevens et Gauthier Chapelle. *Une autre fin du monde est possible. Vivre l'effondrement (et pas seulement y survivre)*. Albin Michel, 2018.

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

Gardening (against) the Anthropocene

Elizabeth Tavella
University of Chicago
ecozona.arts@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2023.14.1.5079>



As present times force us to reassess our interconnection to the more-than-human world, it becomes essential to cultivate ways of life rooted in bonds of reciprocity that disrupt human-centered practices fueling extractive relations with the environment. Such a worldview recalibration implies addressing anthropogenic damage and its asymmetrically distributed effects, including the global processes that entangle to form the Anthropocene, from capitalist interests to imperialist and colonial practices. While the term “Anthropocene” has been widely contested, especially to counter the silencing of social inequalities implied in understandings of humanity as a homogenous species, the current journal issue aligns with Anna Tsing’s framing of the term, which recognizes its potential to generate “concept-changing conversations” (13).

This radical paradigm shift includes rethinking the role given to gardens and their potential to encourage the adoption of a multispecies lens when we enter into a dialogue with landscape. Functioning as a mediation between humans and nature, gardens have historically been associated in western cultures to control and values of human superiority over nature. As a result, their cultural significance reflects the symbolic meanings that nature hold for us. At the same time, gardens are also deeply tied to economical exploitation of the land and have been—and still often are—places of privilege and hegemony. In other words, quoting Shelley Saguaro, “gardens are subject to, and subjects of, the discourses of history, aesthetics and ideology” (ix). Yet, precisely because of the legacies of oppression tied to the history of gardens, they can turn into sites of transgression and transformation, especially through food security activism, community gardening, and the reclaiming of unused or misused property or public spaces. Most importantly, by recognizing them as ecosystems of mutual interdependence where one can restore trans-species justice, they become powerful “places of mutually imagined construction” (Bayes 37).

All seven artistic contributions in the current issue challenge, from various angles, the dominant ideologies tied to gardens. By engaging with the blurring of urban, suburban, and rural boundaries, landscape design, ethics of care, garden politics, multispecies entanglements, and decolonial practices, gardens are creatively reimaged

as reciprocal and relational sites. In fact, in each of the narratives, plants and other more-than-human inhabitants of the garden are not only active participants in the construction of multispecies communities, but also protagonists of their own histories. Hence, by engaging in the generative encounter between multispecies collaboration and storytelling, both vital tools for challenging the Anthropocene, the authors build meaningful and promising connections to place. As a result, the series of interwoven contributions takes readers on a journey of radical hope and resistance grounded in multispecies alliances: the three photographic essays by documenting multispecies encounters in specific, circumscribed local contexts; the four poems by attuning our sensory perception to the vitality of nonhuman microcosms. While the first three contributions can be read independently, their revitalizing potential emerges more vigorously when read as a tryptic.

In *Rewinding Suburbia*, the garden designer Benjamin Vogt, proposes to create “islands of refuge” as a means to re-engage with nature in urban areas. By reinstating wild prairie on Nebraska’s lawns, the aim is not only to reverse a canon of beauty tied to colonialism, namely that of English gardens, but also to highlight the erasure of ongoing structures of power tied to homeownership and accumulation of intergenerational wealth for predominantly white settler descendants in suburban areas. Additionally, in reaction to agricultural monocultures, a predominant landscaping mode driving environmental degradation on a global scale, the author advocates for an inclusive garden design attentive also to the interests of more-than-human actors, whose cultures are valued as much as their “language of hunger, desire, and hope.” Besides celebrating echinacea flowers standing out like “exclamation marks” on the restored lawns, Vogt also admires the diverse communities of insects enlivening these spaces, indirectly raising awareness on the daunting silence of insects in the Anthropocene, whose rapid decline threatens the collapse of our ecosystems. By shifting, then, to a value system that respects multispecies existence, landscape gardening turns into a “liberating and empowering, and perhaps, subversive act.”

Moving to a different geographical area, the second photographic essay by Agnese Bankovska is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork carried out in three different garden settings in Helsinki, Finland: the plantation plots in the Greater Helsinki area, a communal initiative in the industrial district, and the author’s own terrace garden in a suburban area. Grounded in methodologies that foster a multispecies ethics of care, the author focuses on pollinators, so-called “unwanted” species, and soil. In particular, she exposes hierarchies of care based on profitability, which are responsible for the discriminatory labeling of plants as “weeds” according to mobile notions of belonging and exclusion. At the core of the project lies a desire to abandon the harmful rhetoric of “invasiveness” in favour of multisensorial practices grounded in attentiveness to multispecies presence. Once again, acknowledging the “loud conversations” taking place in these shared spaces, illustrates the intricate dynamics of interspecies (re)negotiation that gardens can stimulate.

The third and last photographic essay represents a reinvigorating example of land-based resistance and guerrilla gardening. Written by dp patrick in collaboration with

“allied calendulas against bulldozers,” it chronicles the vicissitudes of tending to “The Big Gay Garden” planted as an act of protest during the 2018 union strike at York University, Canada. Blending queer praxis and radical ecology, the author celebrates the embodied exchange of experiential knowledge across the species line, which in turn transforms the act of gardening into a “tactile and tactical intervention into the symbolic and material geographies of the campus and the political praxes of the strike itself.” As the thriving land offered teachings on nonhierarchical relationality, mutual care, and resilience, the “Gay Gardeners” learned from her how to embrace patience as an antidote to activist burnout, a process that includes learning how to move at a “snail’s pace,” and to privilege joy over hopelessness. The photographs accompanying the text, one of which enriches the cover of the journal, function as a visual reminder of the power of the land “to absorb and transmute collective grief, rage, anger, and despair into nourishment, beauty, sweetness, and delight.”

The transition to poetry encourages an even deeper attunement to nonhuman temporalities, enabled by the ability of fiction to celebrate the garden as “a poetic, literary, mythological, and magical space” (Solnit 75). In fact, the poems act as a magnifying glass amplifying the livelihoods of single flowers or trees, while embedding them into broader (non)human cultures and histories. Starting with Mary Newell’s poem, *Tongue All Out*, readers enter a world of weather imbalance to meditate on the impacts of climate change on gardens. Co-editor of the mindblowing volume *Poetics for the More-than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary*, Newell has also authored a chapbook as well as several poems in journals, all exhibiting a strong ecological inclination. Already from the title of the poem, Newell evokes a sense of loss mixed with suspension, intensified by the sequence of eight tercets, which imbues the poem with a rhythmic cadence that simulates repetitive time cycles. The overwhelming heat permeating the poem is reiterated through lexical choices connected to an excess of light: “sun-glare,” “solar brutishness,” “sun blast.” An increase in aridity is also evoked through the repetition of the word “dry” in the first tercet, further reinforced by a sense of desolation elicited by the image of cup-shaped flowers, usually highly attractive to pollinators, turned into inhospitable dwelling places due to the water shortage. The isolation of the word “empty” at the end of the tercet, set between two punctuation marks, upsets syntactical expectations of words ordinarily dependent on each other, which echoes the disruption of interspecies relations taking place in the garden due to changes in weather patterns. To build empathy toward nonhuman struggles, the poet employs anthropomorphic images to strategically relate nonhuman coping mechanisms in times of drought to a human bodily experience. And so, plant stems stand tall like necks stretching in the air, petals “limp” like fatigued limbs, and drooping cups become hand palms waiting “for a settling petrichor.”

Moving on to Antonello Borra’s contribution, *Erbario* is an example of literary floriculture composed of four short poems in Italian with parallel English text, each one named after a plant: dragon lily, mint, great celandine, and snowdrop. In the abstract, the author writes, “disappointed by mankind I started writing about animals, now it is plants. I have been descending along the hierarchies of the great chain of being in search for a place with peace.” With these poems, the descent into the world of plants uncovers the

role they play in the construction of human cultural traditions, including histories of magical herbalism and botanical lore. Enriched by a mythological tone, the imaginative journey of the first two poems originates from the fragrance of the protagonist flower species: the scent of dragon lily, disliked by humans but appreciated by insect pollinators, a sign of different perceptual worlds coexisting to maintain ecological balance, and the aroma of mint, or “refreshing green,” desired even by underground gods. The third poem takes inspiration from the etymological history of the plant’s name, celandine, which derives from the Ancient Greek word *chelidon*, meaning *swallow*, hence its association with the bird who is considered a herald of Spring. By honoring its cultural history, the poet restores dignity to a plant that is commonly listed as an “invasive” weed in gardens. The last poem takes on a more overt political tone to address the residue of white supremacy lingering in the symbolic value attributed to flowers. Merging the etymological roots of the flowers’ name to their peculiar trait as winter bloomers, the poet defines snowdrops “winter milk,” alluding to the dominance of whiteness in the western/imperialist/religious imaginary, made even more explicit by the syntactic correlation between “white supremacy” and “poison.”

Continuing with the cultural histories of plants, William Bond contributes a poem about an eastern American black walnut tree, which offers a metapoetic consideration on our epistemic limits in grasping nonhuman life-worlds beyond visible horizons: “your hope of a whole in the tree’s shape – branches marginal, roots only more so.” The branches of the tree extend too high up, the roots too far below. The insistence on a semantics of negation stresses even further this epistemic hurdle, while depicting the nature-culture dichotomy as a flaw in human mental constraints (i.e. “unfastening,” “unwinds,” “lacks the heft,” “not even in its permanence”). The poem thus problematizes an approach to knowledge-making that excludes the countless microscopic interactions occurring outside our perceptual reach. Yet, communities of birds find a home on the tree’s branches, such as “the grackles” chatting away, while the walnut tree leaves “ink-stained” traces in the ground, just like humans recording their cultures and (hi)stories through writing. Ultimately, the majestic shape of the tree escapes full comprehension. This epistemological failure resembles the gap existing between signifier and signified, thus pointing to the inherent inadequacy of reductionist approaches to grasp the complexity of more-than-human lifeworlds.

In response to these limitations, the last creative contribution proposes to embrace a process of linguistic decolonization in order to achieve liberation from histories of nomenclature oppression, an integral facet of epistemic injustice. In her poem in six parts, Elizabeth Bolton traces the natural history of fiddleheads, a plant native to northeastern Turtle Island (North America) and a traditional food, to remind readers that words and names carry a legacy of meaning that holds potentially harmful consequences. While reflecting on the relationship between gardening and conquest, Jamaica Kincaid writes in her memoir, *My Garden (Book)*, that “to name is to possess” (114-124). Bolton’s poems closely echo this statement, stressing the need to confront power dynamics hidden in language. As an example, the second poem, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, once *Onoclea struthiopteris*, engages directly with the issue of oppressive naming practices by

questioning Linnaean taxonomy, whose founder is defined as “a second Adam naming and claiming dominion over species around the globe.” The poet also narrates the appropriation of fiddleheads by “refugee-colonists” to make their own recipes, thus exposing the impact of colonial practices also on ancestral foodways. Yet, the fern resists; the “spiral of resilience” survives through centuries of social, cultural, and ecological violence, ready to rewrite history.

To conclude, the body of creative contributions included in this issue brings attention to the regenerative abundance and ecological awareness provided by gardens, while highlighting the opportunities to cultivate multispecies collaboration within these sites. To people asking for a recommendation on how to restore human relationships with the land, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s most frequent answer is: “Plant a garden” (134). Admittedly, the garden is a site where kin-centric multispecies communities can flourish and, most importantly, where the *plotting* of collective liberation can be enacted, both literally and figuratively. However, as the seven authors hereby show, to truly be revolutionary, the act of gardening must be rooted in decolonizing efforts that intentionally remove systemic barriers to land access, while tackling the problematic legacy of naming practices that nonhuman species unwillingly carry with them.

Works cited

- Bayes, Chantelle. *Reimagining Urban Nature. Literary Imaginaries for Posthuman Cities*. Liverpool University Press, 2023.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *My Garden (Book)*: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999.
- Reid, Georgina. Audacious Gardening: On Daring to Care. *Wonderground*, 9 June, 2022. <https://wonderground.press/gardens/audacious-gardening-daring-care/>. Accessed 3 March, 2023.
- Saguaro, Shelley. *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens*. Ashgate, 2006.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Viking, 2000.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. “Earth Stalked by Man.” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2016, pp. 2-16. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ca.2016.340102>.

Rewilding Suburbia in the American Prairies

Benjamin Vogt
Monarch Gardens LLC, USA
bervogt@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.5063>



Sit for 10 minutes in front of just about any aster in autumn in Nebraska, and you will witness diverse communities of adult insects and bugs rising and falling for hours on end. Some are stashing pollen in nests for overwintering larvae, some are fueling up for migration, but for a time they are all speaking the same language of hunger, desire, and hope. Of course, if that aster was planted by us, the satisfaction is high. Some gardeners choose plants native to their local area specifically to provide for wildlife, particularly pollinators. In the food chain it's plants first, then insects—each building upon one another in a purposeful crescendo.

But in North America 5,000 acres are converted into lawn every day—a high maintenance, high input monoculture that has become the default landscaping mode from homes to businesses to schools and churches. 20 trillion gallons of freshwater are used on ornamental lawns, whereas 30 trillion gallons are employed for food production. Right now, the United States boasts enough lawn to equal the size of the state of Georgia. Here in Nebraska, as it is in most rural-dominated states of the central U.S., most people live in the large urban centers of Lincoln and Omaha. Most of the state has been converted from prairie to produce corn and soybeans, while the majority of remaining grasslands are grazed for cattle production. But it's in those urban areas—where people reside but don't have much if any contact with nature—that we need to re-engage ourselves with the environmental issues and benefits. We need contact with daily wildness to stoke the embers of awareness and change.

As humanity tumbles forward into the sixth mass extinction, every space we interact with most intimately and frequently can become an island of refuge, and with enough islands we will create habitat corridors. Our power is immense if our compassion for others is up to the task. Diverse landscapes help non-human cultures just as they help our own—kids with a view of complex nature out of classroom windows see test scores improve, creativity increase, and are better able to work in groups. Plants cool our cities, clean our air, and remediate soil while reducing stormwater runoff. Plants provide habitat and shelter and food for fauna up and down the trophic levels—in fact, plants (along with the insects and bugs they foster), could be said to be the base of the planetary food chain. Plants are useful.

As a garden designer working in the urban core, primarily in Lincoln, Nebraska (a city with a population of 300,000) as well as Omaha, Nebraska (a city of 500,000), I know

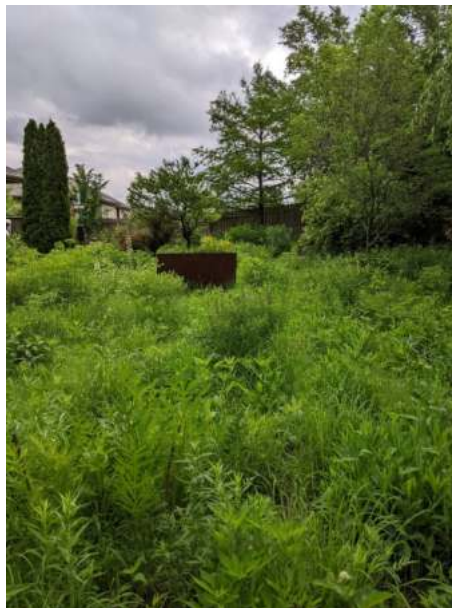
that mimicking local wild plant communities is not simple or easy—partly because we can never truly replicate what is beyond the fence or what once existed in ways we’ll never know. In a virgin tall grass prairie—99% of which has been eradicated in the central United States—there may be dozens upon dozens of species in one square foot, an impossible task in a garden bed where both aesthetics and cost dictate a more simplified plant community. But when we select native plants from the same wild communities, we know they will grow well together, knitting their lives to one another as they move about, come and go, echoing some of what was while providing for some of the wildlife that still exist here in the urban interface. Celebrating natural processes of self-sowing instead of demanding suffocating annual wood mulch applications that curtail plant reproduction is one way to let plants teach us. As the garden grows more wildlife come, teaching us in spades about our homes and the voices silenced by our dominate human cultures. As we let go of our constant helicopter parenting as gardeners and land managers that demands urban landscaping all look the same, we see what’s possible in our world—that as we cultivate diversity and freedom in our urban landscapes, we inherently pave the way to do so in our own human societies. Gardening for nature is liberating and empowering, and perhaps, a subversive act.



In midsummer in Lincoln, Nebraska, the blooms of *Echinacea purpurea* (purple coneflower), *Echinacea pallida* (pale purple coneflower), and *Eryngium yuccifolium* (rattlesnake master) skyrocket above the other plants, creating exclamation marks that provide platforms for pollinators. *Eryngium* itself is recorded to support over 200 adult species of insects and bugs, while the *Echinacea* are host plants for silvery checkerspot larvae (*Chlosyne nycteis*).



When we begin to look at our landscapes through the perceptions of other species, we practice liberation and empowerment. Liberation of dominate thinking that privileges one species over others, and empowerment to foster equality among all species together. Wherever you are, with whatever patch of land you have, every plant makes a difference. It certainly makes a difference for the larvae of black swallowtails.



Rewilding is a process of creating a loose facsimile of indigenous plant communities. In highly-altered urban areas such as this one in Lincoln, Nebraska, the original site conditions are long gone, but many of the native plants have evolved to thrive in a variety of environmental realities. And while the place may be gone forever, the wildlife that depend on those plants are still looking for what they need—which in turn is what we need.



Thick, layered, natural-based landscapes are incredible carbon sinks. They also help amend soil naturally, clean soil, reduce stormwater runoff, filter and cool the air, and provide us a sense of peace and mental restoration. When we experience thick, thriving nature, we begin to understand our world in some radical new ways.



What does it say about the American culture when we cultivate a short monoculture with valuable freshwater, toxin-spewing machines, and industrial fertilizer? Seldom-used spaces of lawn are the antithesis of spaces where we cultivate physical and mental vitality. You can kick a ball around for a while in lawn, but you can't learn the culture of a lightning bug or prairie toad or goldfinch because they aren't present. And so, we aren't fully present, either.



Every garden space matters, such as this garden in Lincoln, Nebraska. Every plant matters, like a rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) or coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). The image shows dozens of species. For the health of other species and the health of our families, bringing the wild home means developing empathy and compassion on a profound new level that we all need in a time of mass extinction and climate change.



Beauty can be found for all species in all seasons. A garden left standing in winter provides wonderful colors, architecture, and seed heads upon which snow delicately balances. And the plants provide shelter for birds, nest cavities for overwintering bees, leaf litter for hibernating amphibians and butterflies—all while continuing to produce a plethora of ecosystem services.



Time stops when you sit next to a bloom and watch what comes. Your life falls away and, in a moment of soft light, the walls fall down as we let another being penetrate our perception. As we perceive a butterfly nectaring on a bloom, we understand all life shares the simple desire to thrive—to have what we need to not only survive but abound with joyful purpose as we find safety in that which nourishes and nurtures us. The garden is not just for me—it is for them—but is an act of defiant compassion where we actively practice the idea that other species have equal rights to our own, The garden becomes an exercise of radical hope that we can do better for all of us—human and animal—in an industrialized world suffering from marginalization and loss. Yes, a flower can carry that weight if we let it.

Multispecies Care in the Urban Gardening Practices in Finland¹

Agnese Bankovska
University of Helsinki, Finland
agnese.bankovska@helsinki.fi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.5055>



In this photo essay, I reflect on the initial stages of my ethnographic fieldwork in three urban and semi-urban gardens in the greater Helsinki area, Finland, undertaken from April to June 2022. I look at the gardens as sites of multispecies care beyond the mere provisioning of food for humans, and work around two central questions: What are the relationships between humans and more-than-humans in the gardens? What is the shape and role of care in these relationships?

My research compares three different gardening forms to find out whether relationships between humans and more-than-humans are experienced and manifested differently across them. Focussing on three underlying themes—pollinators, ‘unwanted’ species and soil—I observe and talk to the gardeners about whether they even think about other species. Who do they care about and how do they express their care?

The first gardens are plantation plots located in the Greater Helsinki area. These plots are a gardening form carried out on land usually rented from the city. For a small yearly fee, each gardener works on their own plot. In general, the gardening colony follows democratically agreed-on rules for gardening practice. Nevertheless, my initial observations show that the multispecies relationships and practices of care unfolding in each plot can be very different. In some plots, human gardeners are more aware of the other species and try to garden by balancing the relationships of care between different species, whether or not the species are considered useful from a human perspective. In other plots, species such as hares, moles, birds, mice, weeds, and other ‘unwanted’ species are considered much less important than the cared-for ‘useful’ species, which are mainly food crops for humans.

The second gardening practice is in the relatively industrial district in Helsinki, sandwiched between residential houses. These gardens are a communal initiative based on the voluntary involvement of anyone who wishes to participate in gardening. Here, gardening is built around caring relationships for species, both those that are grown and those that frequent the gardens. Improvised hare fences stand along with purposefully tended patches of pollinator plants. A hedgehog house is kept in good condition parallel to tedious manual weeding throughout the season. Meanwhile, black and red currant bushes serve as a common food source both for humans and different bird species.

¹ The photo essay is a part of a post-doctoral research project "Multispecies ethics of care in the gardening practices in Vantaa and Helsinki", 2022-2024, funded by Koneen Säätiö.

Finally, using an autoethnographic approach, I analyse my small terrace garden in the suburban area which I have been tending to for nine seasons. Being an ethnographer and gardener simultaneously I pay attention to my relationships with species, mainly pollinators and birds. I care for pollinators by growing flowers and plants that seemingly have no use to me. I also learn to care for birds, squirrels and a forest mouse family sharing with them my crop.

During the research, I have felt challenged by the prevailing human-centred approaches in the existing body of literature about urban and semi-urban gardening practices. Trying to find ways to look at caring from a multispecies perspective became one of the main tasks during the first season of my fieldwork. I focused on attentiveness (Van Dooren, Kirksey and Munster 2015) and noticing (Poikolainen Rosen, Normark and Wiberg 2022) as important practices. Apart from spending time with human gardeners I also attended the field sites outside the times of active gardening, in the early mornings and late evenings. In the communal garden in the centre of Helsinki, I spent time outside of the official co-working days on Wednesdays and Sundays. I also attempted to expand my senses beyond visual observation to include listening, smelling, and touching. Non-verbal research and thinking methods such as photography, doodling and drawing have become a big part of my journey.



The plantation plot gardens in the middle of April. In the foreground, the public skiing tracks are still shimmering in the sun. As I briskly walk by the gardens I stop for a while to observe and listen. I first hear and then notice that a few very active crowds of thrush (*Turdidae*) are frantically looking for the worms. They seem very determined and hungry to get ready for the new breeding season. Thrushes have started the gardening season before their companions and competitors, humans, start arriving at the gardens by taking over the gardening plots and surrounding territory. Their strong beaks are digging up the soil in the few snow-free garden plots and surrounding lawn patches. The air is bursting with the polyphony of their loud conversations offering a promise of the active start of the gardening season.



The spring in Finland that often quickly turns into summer usually starts at the very end of May. It is the time when, with a certain amount of risk, I and many gardeners plant the seedlings outside hoping no frosts will threaten our plants. I started growing my pepper plants in February, inside, under the DIY plant lights. To protect the valuable plants when I move them outside, I take extra precautions to cover them with a protective cloth. It is not unusual that night temperatures in May and June can linger below 10C.



Different animals have their strategies for obtaining food and other goods that are provided in these mainly human-made environments. Maija, one of the gardeners tells, that the pink crocheted hangers are meant to work as a 'scarecrow' for thrushes and hedgehogs alike. "And do they work?" I ask. She shrugs, laughs lightly, and says: "I don't know."



Tina in her garden has taken protective measures against another two interested parties: hares (*Lepus europaeus*) and small white or cabbage white butterflies (*Pieris rapae*). The protective construction is made of metal ribbons and repurposed curtains bought from the local second-hand shop and shelters different plants in the brassica family. Tina thinks the construction is serving its purpose, as the holes in the curtains are very tiny to deter the small flying animals while allowing rain and light to get through. The construction serves well too in protecting the tiny plants, mainly different salads, and cabbages, against hares.



Mike's garden is on the corner and borders the road that cuts the garden colony into two parts. The corner location means that the garden is often first on the way to the wind gusts. The broad beans are planted on the border. Mike tells me that what looks like weeds among the beans is his way of gardening and protecting the beans from the winds. He plans to remove the weeds that are too big and that will compete with the beans for nutrients. The smaller plants will be kept as extra protection for the beans.



In the plot gardens, Mike tells me that in spring every time he is in the garden, undoing the feast of birds in the onion beds is one of the jobs that must be done caring for his crop. Birds search for the earthworms under the newly planted bulbs. The freshly worked soil and frequent spring rain help the birds. Yet, Mike is patient, and every single time tucks the bulbs back into the soil.



This year I bought new strawberry plants for my terrace garden. It became clear very soon that a great share of the small number of berries I will be getting will go to our new winged neighbours, black thrush or blackbird (*Turdus merula*). The birds' demeanour and behaviour are very relaxed and confident while they wander around the strawberry bushes and check out other possible goods on the terrace. I cannot object to the birds sharing this garden and its fruits. Thus, I have accepted that possibly I have planted these strawberries for the blackbirds this year.



For several seasons I have grown my marigold plants from the seed, and they have been a key species in my terrace garden. Marigolds are one of the most beneficial plants in the garden. They are known for their protective and companion qualities for so many other plants, especially ones people consider useful. However, they seem to be not the first choice, at least not at the beginning of the gardening season, of the bees and butterflies that frequent my garden. Nevertheless, during my first season of research I was happy to find out that, eventually, marigolds seem to be liked by hoverflies.

Works Cited

- van Dooren, Thom, et al. 'Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness'. *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 1, May 2016, pp. 1–23. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>.
- Poikolainen Rosén, Anton, et al. *Towards More than Human-Centered Design: Learning from Gardening*. 2022. DOI.org (Datacite), <https://doi.org/10.57698/V16I3.02>.

A Big Gay Garden: Cultivating Collective in Str*ke Time

dp patrick and Allied Calendulas Against Bulldozers

Berea College, United States

patrickd2@berea.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.5065>



On March 5, 2018, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 at York University began what would become the longest strike in the history of post-secondary education in Canada. For nearly five months, hundreds of teaching assistants, contract faculty, and graduate assistants held picket lines on both of York's Toronto campuses, faced down the employer's threats and surveillance, and endured physical, emotional, and financial hardship to fight for better learning and working conditions. As winter turned to spring, the daily routine of setting up pylons and barricades at dawn, talking with sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly drivers trying to enter campus, attending lengthy meetings, and trying to 'play by the rules' was wearing thin. Enraged and exhausted, members began expanding their strategies for surviving the grueling experience of the two-month-old strike. Just days after May Day, when union members used direct action to stop a Board of Governors meeting being held on campus, those arriving to the Main Gate of the university were greeted by a freshly tilled and planted patch of ground mulched in the colors of the anarcho-syndicalist flag: The Big Gay Garden (BGG) was born.

Approximately fifteen by forty feet, the BGG was a highly visible, tactile, and tactical intervention into the symbolic and material geographies of the campus and the political praxes of the strike itself. Initially, the garden comprised neat, regular rows of daisies, calendula, broccoli, herbs, lettuce, and tomatoes. As picket lines were consolidated, a difficult tactical decision taken at the BGG itself, more weary members joined the core group of Gay Gardeners in tending to and hanging out at the BGG. The core group held primary responsibility both for maintaining (i.e. watering) and for protecting the space outside of regular hours, often finding creative ways to redirect resources to do so. There were plenty of 'volunteers' who planted, pruned, and weeded while others relaxed, fo(a)rged new relationships, and took breaks from more stressful duties. Along with allied community members, they brought new skills *and* plants, including corn, beans, squash, roses, pansies, and coneflowers.

During its 154 days of life, the BGG redirected both the mood and the mode of the strike away from maintaining fraying factions and thinning lines toward maintaining life and sustaining relations. Decidedly prefigurative, the BGG grew in the cracks of official union spaces. Gay Gardeners prioritized playful experimentation in the face of seriousness, practiced ease as an antidote to burnout, and offered spaciousness in response to suspicion and scarcity. Through a diversity of tactics, the BGG simultaneously

emplaced, embodied, and expanded collective desires for horizontalism, community care, mutualism, and repair. By interrupting the exhausting rhythms of the strike, the BGG midwived a shift into str*ke time, a mode of relating both to each other and to the land and its many inhabitants with greater curiosity, compassion, and reciprocity. Tending to the BGG in and as str*ke time taught us that the land itself has the power to absorb and transmute collective grief, rage, anger, and despair into nourishment, beauty, sweetness, and delight.



As with other direct actions organized during the strike, the decision to plant a garden challenged hierarchies within the union, especially between conservative factions favoring capitulation and those of us who such factions once described as “left-wing adventurers.” The Big Gay Gardeners coalesced through shared interests in radical ecology and land-based resistance and by deep desires for repertoires of relating that emphasized healing over hierarchy. Most of us did *not* arrive as experienced gardeners. Planting the garden expressed a shared willingness to practice our principled belief in the power of prefigurative action. The BGG could work if we did.



Welcome to the Big Gay Garden! The garden was prominently emplaced at the Main Gate of the university with the central administrative building looming in the distance. The full-sun site posed numerous challenges, not least a lack of easily accessible water. Collectively confronting these challenges mirrored our desire for engaged solidarity and accountability that troubled divisions and exclusions within and beyond the labor movement. A banner reads: “The worker must have bread, but they must have roses too.” Framed by flags of Local 3903, the Mohawk Warrior Society, and Six Nations, the BGG centered the work of patiently repairing relations.



Str*ke time moved at a snail’s pace. Such slowness afforded time to reclaim our responsibilities toward ourselves and the land sustaining us and required a humbling return to basics: trash pickup, fetching water, weeding. Gardening taught us to transmute

difficult emotions and persistent political tensions through noticing, listening, navigating conflict, admitting defeat, harvesting insight, appreciating beauty, laughing. Together with the *rudbeckia* (lower left) that anchored the four corners of the garden, which Gay Gardeners dubbed Rude Becky, we abided and adapted to the punitive procedures of institutional politics and harsh weather conditions alike.



York's "This Is..." campaign suggested that the university was a place for 'preparing engaged global citizens.' Located directly adjacent to the BGG, this billboard became a favored spot for 'civil disobedience,' which BGG'ers took to calling 'soft crimes.' Owing to its prominent location, the BGG invited, if not demanded, constant rearticulation and reimagination of the impact that the strike was having on the very 'engaged citizens' that the campaign interpellated. The administration's initial refusal to engage the union had inspired the chant "CUPE wants to bargain." Their persistent refusal to bargain eventually begat the remix: "CUPE wants to garden."



By early June, the BGG was becoming a key site for widening our responses to the aporias of the strike. As we came to know and trust each other through the slow work of tending to the garden, we began composting. Announcing the university's "Pride Month" events, President Rhonda Lenton tweeted her congratulations to the right-wing Premier-elect, Doug Ford. The BGG responded by organizing Str*ke Pride, a workshop and a counterdemonstration that adapted tactics and aesthetics from global transfeminist movements. Our capacity to turn this political nihilism into a colorful counterdemonstration nourished and expanded the practice of engaged solidarity.



Living into the meaning of the Big GAY Garden, Str*ke Pride drew attention to the disavowal of queer and feminist labor and to the university's systematic silencing of survivors of sexual violence, which was a key issue in bargaining. Str*ke Pride also responded to hypermasculine and reactionary repertoires of political action within the local. Union spaces sometimes, if not often, left little room for care, slowness, joy, and deviation from procedural norms. The BGG's celebratory unruliness tended toward

queerness by encouraging self-expression, self-irony, and generative failure. One did not have to be a “good gardener” to be a gay gardener.



August 08, 2018

Allied Calendulas Against Bulldozers
biggaygarden@gmail.com



4700 Keele St.
Toronto ON
Canada M3J 1P3
416-736-2100
EXT 40505

Dear Allied Calendulas Against Bulldozers,

Thank you for your letter dated July 27, 2018 regarding the garden created at York Blvd during the CUPE 3903 strike. In the spirit of coming together to heal as a community, the University has agreed to allow the garden to live out its natural seasonal cycle until the harvest. Your offer to clean the space by October 8, 2018 is both reasonable and achievable in allowing the garden's products to be harvested and shared with the community.

Please note that our intent will be to restore the area to its previous condition and use after the food is harvested but no later than the end of October. Further to the benefits that you outlined in your letter in relation to the garden and gardening in general, I would encourage you and those interested in community gardening to continue using York's Maloca Garden.

Sincerely,



Two days after Provincial back-to-work legislation forced an end to the strike, the BGG wrote a letter rebuffing the administration's framing the space as part of a pattern of "harassment" and "property destruction." Refusing the characterization of collective healing as destructive, we wrote: "As the caretakers of this garden, we would like to see the final harvest and allow the plants to return to the earth, rather than be unceremoniously uprooted." Surprisingly, the administration conceded, yielding a rare victory and affirming the garden as one of the few aspects of the strike that made a frequently inhospitable campus convivially communal.



Despite their concession to the BGG, the university proceeded to pursue harsh reprisals against five union members and three undergraduate organizers. On the final date stipulated in the letter, the BGG organized Respectfest, a legal defense fundraiser that took its name from the administration’s hollow calls for “respect” and “compassion.” Featuring fresh food, live music, custom tie dye t-shirts, and an auction of items including vegan bike tube floggers, Respectfest supported the formation of an unlikely coalition that provided material and emotional support through the protracted legal battle. The final crop of tomatoes was harvested and turned into a tart, delicious chutney.

poem

Mary Newell
University of Connecticut, USA
mnewell4@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4889>



Tongue All Out

Heat, and the waste of all that
flower labor –was there a hint
how dry July would be, so dry

I rip out phlox to save less lusty
plants, risk a water-prism scorch
to circulate the hose in sun-glare,

draw censure from housemates
who want pressure for showers–
can't settle for eau de cologne.

I don't aspire to a disembodied eye,
curious what will survive such solar
brutishness: much skin in the game.

May was so drizzly-green I tucked in
one more plant in June –then ten–
lush colors, pollinator lure-scents.

Towering blooms of Silphium –cup plant–
follow sun-trail, its overlapped leaf-cups,
reservoirs for bird and bee water, empty.

Echinacea's petals limp in the sun-blast;
Hypericum holds drooping cup blooms
like palms eager for a damp handout.

Desperation in these drought doldrums
for a settling petrichor. Sniffer attuned,
neck stretched ready to open mouth wide.

From Erbario

Antonello Borra
The University of Vermont, USA
antonello.borra@uvm.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4712>



Dragontea

Nell'ora di Saturno
vedrai, durante il sonno,
demoni, morti e cose
terribili e inaudite,
un odore di carne
putrefatta attrarrà
insetti a centinaia
per dare un nuovo inizio
al ciclo del serpente
che si morde la coda.

Menta

E chi non ha qualcosa
di cui si può lagnare?
Le ragioni del cuore
danno spesso alla testa.
Se un dio del sottosuolo
s'invaghisce di luce
e di calore prima
o poi ricercherà
quel verde rinfrescante.

Celidonia

Per chi è come la rondine
schiuder gli occhi alla luce
non farà primavera.
L'usignolo che canta
forse è fonte d'invidia,

Dragon Lily

In the hour of Saturn
you will see, while you sleep,
demons, dead people, and terrible
and unheard-of things,
a smell of putrefied
flesh will attract
hundreds of insects
to give a new beginning
to the cycle of the serpent
that bites its own tail.

Mint

And who has got nothing
to complain about?
Heart's motives
often go to the head.
If a god from the underground
falls in love with light
and warmth sooner
or later he will seek
that refreshing green.

Greater Celandine

Opening eyes to the light
will not make a Spring
for one who's like the swallow.
A singing nightingale
is perhaps source of envy,

e l'upupa chissà?
Ma se manca il respiro,
serve un dono del cielo.

Bucaneve

Supremazia del bianco:
il pericolo regna,
il latte dell'inverno
si rapprende in veleno.
Rintocchi di campana
e stelle del mattino
annunciano il ritorno
ai colori, al calore.

and the hoopoe, who knows?
But if you run out of breath
you'll need a gift from the sky.

Snowdrop

White supremacy:
danger reigns,
winter milk
thickens in poison.
Bell tolls
and morning stars
announce the return
of colors, of warmth.

Fiddleheads

Elizabeth Bolton
Swarthmore College, USA
ebolton1@swarthmore.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4651>



1. Feint

Searching for fiddleheads, I almost crush
the fern's prothallus, that tiny heart-
shaped leaf whose underside produces eggs,
plus sperm that needs water to find and fertilize

another's eggs—a drama invisible
to those of us distracted by the spirals peeking
through brown papery wrapping
as if an old-time grocer had left them,

still growing, half-packaged, on the counter.
Stiff-armed beside them, last year's fertile fronds
raise their stipes and blades, pinnae held high, enclosing
spore-bearing sori that rupture and release.

Here, says the fern: take, eat. In two moons
the real game begins, fertility emerging
inconspicuous amid the showy twice-cut
finely-dissected sterility of plume.

2. *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, once *Onoclea struthiopteris*

Who died and made Linnaeus
a second Adam, naming and claiming
dominion over species around the globe?

Despite his force, his stamp, his fame,
names drift like ferns filling the valley:
Linnaeus matched this fern with the flightless

ostrich, saw its sterile fronds as arching
feathers, fertile fronds as *onoclea*, closed
vessels, pinnae enfolding sori. A hundred years

later, an Italian botanist (Todaro) claimed fern-naming
rights to honor an Italian scholar of bio-electricity
(*Matteucci*) in the year of his death, as if tucking

a fern-feather in his colleague's cap. The names so
arbitrary, despite the consequence
of human signifying. The ostrich feather

first a mark of bravery in battle,
then an over-prized, democratized decoration:
in producing feathered caps to meet demand,

the worlds' largest, fastest birds were hunted
to extinction in their northern range. Ostrich fern,
duplicitous in reproduction, faces better odds.

3. Tonic

Look north instead of east to find the name *mahsus*,
associated with *good magic*, shared by the Maliseet
of New Brunswick's Saint John River valley—

but all these names do damage too: call the river
Wolastoq, inhabited by the Wolastoqiyik,
people of the beautiful river, who fed *mahsus*

to starving refugees, loyalists fleeing
the British defeat. The Wolastoqiyik
ate the vitamin-rich spirals as spring tonic,

some cooking the whole crown on heated stones
beneath spreading branches. The refugee-colonists
took the tonic, the good magic, very much to heart:

*Fiddleheads steamed or boiled with butter and lemon,
or pickled in vinegar three ways: try pepper,*

*nutmeg, cinnamon, allspice; or garlic and dill;
or onions, sugar, turmeric, mustard seeds.*

*Steam or boil, roast or grill, mix with buttermilk,
cornstarch, dijon mustard, tarragon, lemon juice.*

No heated stones now, no spread branches, but still,
between your teeth, the earthy crunch of spring,
hiding beneath the far-fetched seasonings.

4. *Spira mirabilis*

Of course the fern predates the fiddle,
follows a different curve—that of ram’s horns,
elephant tusks, the chambered nautilus,
the flight path of moths approaching the light
or peregrine falcons attacking their prey:
the slow curve of growth, the fast rush of death.

Spira mirabilis, the wonderful spiral;
proportional, equiangular.
For Jacob Bernoulli a symbol
“either of fortitude or of constancy
in adversity, or of the human body...
restored to its exact and perfect self.”
On his grave: *eadem mutata resurgo*.
though changed, I rise again the same.

5. Ghost bowing

Romy, my sister’s child, fiddlehead
of the best kind, bends over the scroll

of their fiddle, its spiral dancing when the bow leaps
up; improvised ornaments, ghost-

bowing syncopation, and double-stopped drone
as percussive as their fast feet lightly stomping,

heel-and-toe, close to the floor, bowhairs snapping
in the dim cottage light. Tragedy toils

behind the good magic of their playing:
near Wolastoq, the beautiful river, displaced

people battled to displace other settlers both
old and new. Romy's ghostly syncopations

register the residue of French Acadians, who shared
words, foods, raids with their Mi'kmaq hosts, but refused

an oath of loyalty to the conquering British and so
were exiled from their non-native land, many

perishing at sea in enemy ships.
The grand dérangement. New settlers disputed

Mi'kmaw sovereignty for centuries. Those who took
the land carried their own displaced histories:

clansmen slaughtered in the Highland clearances;
evicted families emigrating to a world new

to them, bringing their reels, their music, rebellions
replayed in the stepping feet, counterpoint

to Acadian ghost-bowings. Drums and dancers,
fiddleheads consoling the forlorn: all still here

for those still listening, like the Wolastoqiyik drums—
still playing, still improvising, still here,

though non-indigenous fishermen fight
reclaimed Mi'kmaw fishing rights to the present day.

6. Double bluff

Coiled vegetative strength forcing its way
through leaf litter to the sun: a form to shield
the tousled pinnae already harvesting
scraps of solar energy to drive its slow unfurling.

That sterile beauty both an engine and a double feint:
below the prothallus' tiny heart,
the water-stressed challenges of reproduction,
sun-powered rhizomes extend, reproducing the self

through secondary crowns, clonal stands, leaving

in this two-week harvest window just the taste of time
vanishing, sweet tonic turning bitter with age,
plumes tattered by early fall, curling toward

another spring: no unchanging resurgence here,
but still a spiral of resilience, a survivor's canny strength.

Energy in Crisis: New Perspectives on Petrocultures

Katie Ritson

Rachel Carson Center for Environment & Society, LMU Munich, Germany

katie.ritson@carsoncenter.lmu.de

Stacey Balkan, and Swaralipi Nandi, editors. *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2021), 308 pp.

Carola Hein, editor. *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 300 pp.

Caren Irr, editor. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 304 pp.

Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson, editors. *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 292 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4933>



Strange to think there was a time (not so long ago at all) when energy—in particular energy derived from fossil fuels —was the invisible infrastructure of modern life, a material imbrication that petrocultural scholars needed to write about in order to draw attention to. As I write this, in October 2022, Europe is heading into winter on the cusp of an “energy crisis” and accompanying sense of emergency. Even though the nature of the crisis (the destruction of Ukrainian power stations supplying large parts of the country, and the lack of gas flowing through pipelines to Western Europe) is not quite the same as the crisis that drives research in the energy humanities (global heating caused to a large extent by fossil fuel addiction), there can be no doubt that our global energy dependencies are visible as never before. This energy crisis comes at the ebb of the Covid19 pandemic that worked in a different way to trouble established petro-flows, as flights were grounded, cars stayed parked in driveways, and we all had a brief glimpse of a world in which it was possible to do things differently.¹ There has scarcely been a more charged moment to reflect on petromodernity.

¹ Although, as Caren Irr and Nayoung Kim point out in their introduction to *Life in Plastic*, the immediate uptick in the amount of single-use plastic in circulation is a sobering reminder of the negative petrocultural impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

And reflection is underway. While political developments have propelled oil infrastructure to the forefront of international discussions, recent cultural productions bear witness to a growing interest in the aesthetic and cultural life of oil. TV dramas, such as the Danish political drama *Borgen: The Power and the Glory* (2022) and the Norwegian TV drama *Lykkeland (State of Happiness 2018-2022)* signal a greater mainstream engagement with the topic of petroculture in the Global North. Two large exhibitions in northern Europe took up this topic explicitly in 2021, in *Experiences of Oil (Opplevelser av olje, Stavanger Kunstmuseum 12.11.2021–8.4.2022)* and *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age (Oil: Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 4.9.2021–9.1.2022)*; and the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo featured an artist intervention called “Mattering Oil” (29.10–7.11.2021) in its exhibition of North Sea extraction technology. (More recently, protesters from the group Just Stop Oil staged artistic inventions of a different kind, throwing soup and mashed potatoes at paintings in galleries in London and Amsterdam and gluing themselves to the walls to draw attention to their campaign).²

This moment of high petro-visibility in Europe comes together with what I consider to be a second-generation petrocultural scholarship, that moves beyond the broad challenge of pointing out and theorizing the uneven impacts of fossil fuel addiction, and starts to delineate, collect, and describe in detail the characteristics of a diverse array of oil modernities. The influential scholarship by the pioneers of energy humanities has put the notion of “petroculture” onto solid footing, but it has (necessarily, perhaps) been a largely Anglo-American undertaking. Notwithstanding the fact that it was Amitav Ghosh’s prescient and provocative review of an Arabic novel that first posited the difficulty of engaging imaginatively with oil (Ghosh 1992), it was North American scholars such as Frederick Buell, Stephanie LeMenager, Imre Szeman, Ross Barrett, Daniel Worden, and Patricia Yaeger who were among the first to theorize the field in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Grewe-Volpp). In the UK, Graeme Macdonald has done much to open up the concept of petrocultures for postcolonial literary analysis (Macdonald 2013; 2017). Their work continues to underpin and inform the edited collections I will review in this article, each of which brings together insights from global petromodernity in a new and thought-provoking constellation.

One such constellation is that explored in the collection *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture*, edited by Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson (2021). This rich collection brings together scholarship that gives a range of perspectives on the cold-water frontiers of “tough oil”—frontiers that are moving into ever colder waters and more extreme weather. The range of analytical approaches in *Cold Water Oil* is impressive, at times distractingly divergent, ranging from the representations of the ecological and human traumas of 1980s oil disasters, to the geopolitical limitations on oil exploration in the waters around Svalbard, to autobiographical accounts of a life devoted to drawing and painting offshore installations in the North Sea. But while the pieces in the volume differ significantly in the approach they take to exploring the cold water oil encounter, the

² See their campaign website: <https://juststopoil.org/2022/10/16/why-art-why-now/>

geographical coherence provided by the specificities of drilling for oil in the North (with ice floes, polar darkness, and geopolitical brinkmanship in contested waters amongst the challenges), the way that knowledge and technology is shared between key locations (Aberdeen, Stavanger, Newfoundland) and the fact that this kind of tough-oil extraction happens offshore make the book a worthwhile endeavour. As the editors of the volume note in their introduction “offshore petroleum extraction typically occurs well out of sight of land and within a context of deliberately cultivated corporate secrecy” (Polack & Farquharson, 2); the contributors have risen to the challenge in bringing to light these specific characteristics of cold water offshore extraction from their respective positions of expertise.

Many of the articles engage with the challenges of representing offshore oil, of rendering industry and its (actual and potential) impacts and entanglements visible. This is the case in the strikingly personal essays by Chie Sakakibara & Rosemary Ahtuanguruak, in which the authors talk of the erasure of Indigenous lifeways from Arctic Alaska, and by Sue Jane Taylor, whose portrayals of offshore infrastructure and its workers has brought her up against the corporate desire to avoid oversight. Other pieces, such as those by Graeme Macdonald and Fiona Polack, expose the mechanisms by which largely unseen offshore structures and their risks can make sudden, dramatic landfall. Polack’s essay is concerned with three terrible rig accidents involving huge loss of life—the *Alexander Kielland* in 1980, the *Ocean Ranger* in 1982, and the *Piper Alpha* in 1988—and the way they made both human and ecological trauma visible. Macdonald’s musing on the sudden appearance of a decommissioned rig, the *Transocean Winner*, onshore in Scotland in 2020, and the structures of obsolescence it reveals, finds an uncanny echo in Jason Haslam’s reading of a short story by New Weird writer China Miéville, who has revenant rigs returning to land by their own, malevolent agency.

The introduction of the collection reflects on the current moment and the possibility it represents to rethink the role of oil. While the volume was written during the pandemic and had gone to press when Putin’s troops invaded Ukraine, the sense of accelerating global crisis allows for war as well as global warming and disease. “*Cold Water Oil* considers offshore oil development in and across the oceanic territories of Canada, Norway, the UK, Russia, the US, and the Iñupiat of Alaska at a time of profound global instability and uncertainty,” as the editors write (4). This moment of upheaval is a thread running through the volume, and speaks to the value of fast publishing processes. The geopolitical tensions underpinning tough oil in the far north is the subject of Helge Ryggvik’s insightful analysis of oil exploration in the Arctic Sea around Svalbard, and Nina Poussenkova’s review of Russian attempts to drive forward oil extraction in Russia’s High North. Bright Dale and Danine Farquharson have edited their pandemic email-exchange (entitled “Dispatches from cold water oil cultures”) into an experimental essay that recursively constitutes the *in medias res* of an industry that is above all resistant to closure, even as the discussions turn upon the possibility of oil, or its political capital, running out.

The geographical and spatial rationale that underpins *Cold Water Oil* is also the constituting factor of the recent collection *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*,

edited by Carola Hein (2022). This welcome addition to the petroculturalist's bookshelf explores the geographical and infrastructural implications of petromodernity, showing how pipelines, offshore installations, ports, petrol stations, and refineries shape the physical spaces we inhabit. Carola Hein introduces the concept of the "global palimpsestic petroleumscape" to describe the "layered physical and social landscape that reinforces itself over time through human action" (3) Besides contributions that complement and expand on the geographical terrain of *Cold Water Oil* through their exploration of specifically spatial and architectural dynamics (such as Nancy Couling's "The Offshore Petroleumscape: Grids, Gods, and Giants of the North Sea"), *Oil Spaces* presents a truly global array of case studies, analysing the delineation, cultural manifestations, and post-oil potential of petroleumscapes from the U.S.A. to Kuwait, from Brazil to China, Germany, Italy, and across Africa. This approach, providing a clearly defined point of access to different political, ecological, and cultural spaces through its lens of petro-modern architecture and planning, is useful in grasping the integrated, systematic global nature of fossil fuel infrastructure and culture, without losing sight of the very uneven patterning of the material benefits of cheap fuel. While acknowledging the limitations of a single edited collection in approaching so vast a topic, Hein writes of the need to "tease out a new vocabulary of conceptual understanding: of petroleum spatial systems, tangible and intangible spaces, oil materiality, oil ecologies, the energy humanities" (17) and this book is an important step in this direction.

Both *Cold Water Oil* and *Oil Spaces* move petrocultural discussions forward through their focus on specific geographies. Two further anthologies look at particular aspects of oil production and consumption through their representations in fiction and art. The collection *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere*, edited by Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi and published by Pennsylvania State University Press in 2021, develops the field through literary-theoretical conceptions of global petroculture, in particular with respect to postcolonial literary theory. The oil nodes that are discussed in the book map onto many of the oil-extractive sites of the contemporary world—Nigeria, Colombia, India, the Persian Gulf—leaving North America and Europe as a shadowy, neocolonial presence; geographically, the collection is the opposite of *Cold Water Oil* (I was tempted to think of it as a companion volume, with a symmetrical title—"Hot Equatorial Oil?"), but this collection is concerned less with the physical environments and technologies of drilling for oil, cohering instead around the bodies labouring in oil production, their resistance to colonial modes of extraction, and the potential of literary work to expose the workings of petromodernity.

The collection self-consciously marks its place in the development of a new phase of petrocultural research, including a preface by Amitav Ghosh reflecting on his 1992 coinage petrofiction ("Petrofiction, revisited") that has a prime place in the genealogy of the field, and an edited and abridged version of the influential 2017 article "Conjectures on World Energy Literature" by Imre Szeman as well as an afterword by the same. Amitav Ghosh is a focal point of the volume as an influential figure linking scholarship with fiction, Global North with Global South: as the editors write, "petrocultural discourse has largely been tethered to cultural production in the Global North ... It has therefore been a central

aim of this volume to engage with petrofictions in a variety of postcolonial and world literature milieus: African, South American, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and transnational encounters addressing the all-pervasive oil economy” (Preface, x). The authors demonstrate in their introduction the prevalence of the American petro-imaginary and its fiction of wealth even as they seek to decenter it, and many of the individual contributions draw on and subvert this common petro-imaginary in their different world-literary contexts. This is the case for example in Helen Kapland’s excellent contribution on petrofeminism, in which she reads Nigerian romantic fiction (including in this expansive category Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s internationally acclaimed *Americanah*) for the way they reveal the cultural capital in the petromodern accessories of the car and the mobile phone. Sharae Deckard shows in her rich article how women’s labour is also implicated in sites of extraction, in sex work and in the aspirational notion of (white, north American) housewifization, and how women’s resistance can also be mobilised around oil. Two contributions read Ghosh’s work as a writer of fiction through his novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Circle of Reason* (analysed by Stacey Balkan and Micheal Angelo Rumore respectively).

On a theoretical level, Ghosh’s influence is felt also through the arguments he makes in *The Great Derangement* about the inability of the modern literary novel to represent the realities of the fossil-fuel dependence and the Anthropocene. The question of what literature—in particular, literary fiction—can and can’t do, is explicitly addressed with reference to Ghosh in many of the contributions. It is also implicit in the two more experimental contributions to the volume, the interview with Indian author Benyamin and the testimonies from the Permian Basin. These contributions are a welcome counterweight to the (admittedly excellent) literary criticism in the volume, a reminder of the limitations of literary culture as a framework for assessment. Imre Szeman, in his thought-provoking afterword, wonders, “What exactly is it that we learn about the practices and processes of extraction from an assessment of literature about it”? (269). Pointing out that many of the conclusions from energy-conscious literary analysis show the ways in which literature conceals the realities of energy extraction and energy dependence from readers, Szeman wants to know how we might refashion our critical practices around this, a question which, he admits, he is grappling with in his own work. The open-endedness of the afterword makes clear both the importance of the volume and the need for new theoretical engagements with the enormity of what Szeman calls “the lie of modernity” (266).

Petrocultural research has been disproportionately interested in what is often hidden from view; the messy, dirty and selectively visible processes of drilling for oil, and the uneven impact on bodies and ecologies. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity*, edited by Caren Irr and published by Minnesota University Press in 2021, takes up a different, hypervisible aspect of petromodernity. “Plastics are”, Caren Irr and Naoyoung Kim argue in their introduction, “deeply integrated into the cultural imaginary of petromodernity. In a culture and economy defined by its dependence on the energy provided by finite fossil fuels, plastics promise a bright, cheap and sterile perfection that obscures the broken, soggy waste on our shores” (1). There is much to be said for reading

about plastic art alongside the imagination and politics of fossil fuel extraction; endlessly mobile, malleable, and enduring, plastic has an allure quite different from that of the raw materials from which it is produced. Whereas the visibility of oil extraction is localised, policed by corporations and vested interests, and kept out of mainstream view, plastic is so ubiquitous and commonplace that it takes special effort to consciously “see” it, and more still to imagine life without it.

Unlike the previous collections, which in different ways trouble the dominance of the US-American experience of petromodernity for the purposes of petrocultural scholarship, this volume has a strong North American focus—many key case studies in the first part of this volume, e.g. the comic superhero in Daniel Worden’s article, the graphic novel in W. Dana Philips’ close reading, and the film *Polyester* analysed by Paul Morrison, are firmly U.S. in scope. Loren Glass’ excellent article exploring the long-playing record is an excellent case study of petroculture at work, showing how the way music was composed and consumed in the twentieth century was tuned to the specific capacities and temporalities of vinyl. Seen against the previous collections, though, the dominance of North American or at least Global North petromodernity stands out somewhat in the first part of this volume. Indeed, much as the prevalence of plastic stymies attempts to imagine a different reality, so the North American petro-imaginary tends to stifle the bigger picture.

The second part of the collection, roughly speaking, integrates a greater global diversity of artistic interactions with plastic into the North American origin story in tracing the paths of plastic from shiny modernity to dispersed remnants—trash. We encounter in trash the durability of plastic and its potential for testimony, for example in Maurizia Boscagli’s contribution on the plastiglomerate, and in the lifejackets left behind by refugees on beaches that are recirculating in art exhibitions. Plastic’s longevity provokes a range of reactions, from its promise of a future to mourning the pasts it signifies. Lisa Swanstrom’s article, which shows in microcosm the journey of plastic in speculative fiction from H.G. Wells to Afrofuturism, ties this trajectory effectively to a changing narrative of futurity: where once plastic’s potentiality was promise, now it is trash that holds the only promise, of (partial) escape or (partial) redemption from the ruins of petromodernity.

It is clear that there is much more work to come, not just in reflecting on petromodernity in all its different geographical, cultural, and artistic manifestations, but also in looking ahead to a post-oil future. It is affirming to see some of the same scholars whose work is included here named as members of the After Oil Collective, whose most recent publication, *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice*, (2022) edited by Ayesha Vermuri and Darin Barney, is published by Minnesota University Press in its Forerunners series. “Solarity,” the group writes, “is the condition we inhabit as we struggle to make worlds and build futures out of the ruins of petroculturalism” (1). Escape from oil dependence is going to require concerted effort from many quarters and requires upending almost everything we know about the spaces we inhabit and the histories that we inherit. The work goes on.

Works Cited

- Balkan, Stacey, and Swaralipi Nandi, editors. *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2021.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel." *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*. 1992. Houghton, 2005, 138–151.
- . *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The U of Chicago P, 2016.
- Grewe-Volpp, Christa. "Petrocultures." *Ecozon@*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020, pp. 273–7.
- Hein, Carola, editor. *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*. Routledge, 2022.
- Irr, Caren, editor. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity*. Routledge, 2021.
- Just Stop Oil. "Why Art? Why Now." *Just Stop Oil*, 16 October 2022. Accessed 28 October 2022. <https://juststopoil.org/2022/10/16/why-art-why-now/>
- Macdonald, Graeme. "'Monstrous transformer:' Petrofiction and world literature." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 289–302.
- Macdonald, Graeme. "Research Note: The Resources of Fiction." *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–20.
- Polack, Fiona, and Danine Farquharson, editors. *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture*. Routledge, 2021.
- Szeman, Imre. "Conjectures on World Energy Literature: Or, What is Petroculture?". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 277–88.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*. Fordham University Press, 2017.
- Vermuri, Ayesha, and Darin Barney, editors. *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice*. Minnesota UP, 2022.

Creativity and Resistance in the Age of Waste

Pamela Phillips

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus

pamela.phillips1@upr.edu

Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 75 pp.

Samuel Amago. *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2021), x + 239 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4922>



Waste is one of the world's most critical challenges. It is a truly global one as the waste footprint formed by hazardous and non-hazardous, electronic, solid, plastic, and toxic detritus, to name a few, affects the human and non-human communities across the planet. Waste is also complex, as political, economic, environmental, technological, and social factors combine to make it an interdisciplinary issue. Alongside efforts to manage waste and design cleaner production policies, the scholarly field of Waste Studies has launched a line of inquiry that is rapidly and intensely interrogating waste's history and its role in our interaction with the environment. The meaning of waste, what it is, and who decides what is waste are politically charged questions that have become particularly pressing in recent years. Waste Studies marks the culmination of Ecocriticism: if the latter's starting point was the appreciation of the natural world as an object of admiration, Waste Studies makes apparent the human capacity to poison and erase that very natural world. Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* and Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* enrich this fertile intellectual current and resonate with our current time through their advancement of insightful and valuable statements about waste, its relationship to cultural production, and its entanglement with socioeconomic issues shaping the space where waste appears.

Published in print format in May and August 2021, respectively, *Wasteocene* and *Basura* complement each other with their persuasive contributions to the common threads that structure Waste Studies. While neither mentions the other in their comprehensive bibliographies, these projects coincide in their movement beyond the rhetoric that reduces waste to discarded material and its disposal to privilege wasting, an active process that offers a powerful tool to analyze the social and political relationships that structure contemporary society. Armiero approaches this topic through the

formulation of the theory of the Wasteocene, the Age of Waste. Amago's monograph is a rereading of the Spanish transition to democracy through the lens of waste and trash. The place-based perspective informing Waste Studies organizes Armiero and Amago's research. Armiero defends his theory of the Wasteocene through case studies that cover a wide geographical scope, moving from Naples, the United States, Brazil to Ghana. In contrast, *Basura* scours waste in Madrid with some reference to Barcelona, thereby laying the groundwork for future scholarship to assess the wasting process in other parts of Spain. Both volumes assemble an assortment of compelling examples, ranging from artistic productions and social predicaments, that make and keep visible waste and trash in response to the official—governmental—narrative to erase or remove it to designated areas. This method of analysis gives substance to Armiero's affirmation that the "Wasteocene has not received much attention from scientists; nonetheless, it has indeed become an important trope in the narratives about our collective futures" (13).

Environmental historian Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* forms part of the Cambridge University Press *Elements in Environmental Humanities*, a series that examines principal aspects of the convergence of human and planetary life. *Elements* generate research and dialogue through short expositions that present up-to-date arguments (3). In keeping with this objective, *Wasteocene* presents "theoretical arguments and empirical cases" (58) to instruct the reader to recognize the wasting crisis, train its eye to identify wasting people and places, and design strategies based on the principles of commoning. Armiero's project builds from a proposal laid out in a frequently cited article he published with Massimo De Angelis in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 2017. "Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries" asserts that the narrative of the Anthropocene is a universal one and as such it downplays differences in agency or consequence wrapped up in the current global climate crisis. The "Age of Humans" does not account for social variability and projects blindness toward the political and economic factors that affect life and space. This critique insists on acknowledging social and economic inequalities and injustices and identifying efficient solutions. Following the lead of scholars who point to capitalism as the primary force transforming the planet, Armiero and De Angelis coin the term Wasteocene with which to think about the present epoch. Their contention that waste and wasting relationships confirm the contaminating nature of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene becomes the central argument that Armiero develops in more detail in *Wasteocene*.

After a brief introduction that outlines *Wasteocene's* contents and method as established by the *Elements* series, Armiero dedicates chapter two to the history and definition of the Wasteocene and an analysis of the inscription of the waste apocalypse in science-fiction narratives. Here the author unpacks his theory that waste or, more precisely, wasting is a core element of the Anthropocene. Human activity in the Capitalocene produces waste in multiple forms and its disposal or removal generates a political and hygienic issue that reinforces the "us/them" social organization. Armiero conceptualizes this relationship as "wasting", or the socio-ecological relations that create wasted places and people who exist in and suffer from power inequalities linked to that space. Viewing the Wasteocene from this perspective makes apparent two simultaneous

operations that secure the intersection of capitalism and colonialism, namely, “the production of wasted people and places goes hand in hand with the construction of gated communities” (16). This statement enables Armiero to locate the human body “at the center of the Wasteocene” (12). Importantly, the individual examples cited in *Wasteocene* all converge on the body as the primary space where the consequences of waste unfold and as the starting point of a social response. At work in science fiction, for example, as the author explains in chapter two’s conclusion, is an effective projection of key tropes of the Wasteocene, including images of ruins, wasted landscapes, and dehumanized bodies, all juxtaposed with clean spaces.

The four chapters that follow detail the wasting process in different geographies and through distinct mediums to illuminate the interconnections between waste, capitalism, and colonialism. Chapter three studies memory, toxic narratives, and wasted stories as creative vehicles that secure and confirm the Wasteocene. The dam disasters in Vajont, Italy in 1963, and Rio Doce in Brazil in 2015, daily life in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, and the electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie, Ghana, are tragic and discriminatory real spaces and events whose memory and existence is “domesticated” so that suffering, loss, and grief do not disturb the social and economic factors underlying the injustices. In response to the toxic narrative’s concealment of injustices, guerrilla narratives emerge as a literary form of resistance that can be grouped with the commoning practices the author details later in his study. Armiero references his own project *ToxicBios. A Guerrilla Narrative Project* as an example of an archive of toxic autobiographies, wasted stories that prioritize the centrality of the body, race, and gender in the Wasteocene and confirm its place-based and very personal nature: “One must recognize to have been wasted, to live in the Wasteocene, in order to fight against it” (25).

The city of Naples offers several real-life examples of the Wasteocene that Armiero reads through this critical lens in chapter 4. The previous section’s presentation of toxic narratives prepares Armiero to argue that the city’s cholera epidemics of 1884 and 1973 and the waste emergencies of the 1990s–2000 demonstrate the official strategy of prioritizing a solution to the immediate problem that perpetuates the wasting process jeopardizing daily life. What makes this analysis so attractive is its pertinence: Amago joins the dialogue with his study of the November 2013 Madrid sanitation workers’ strike and the reader is prompted to make connections with other recent instances, including lead exposure in Detroit, Edinburgh’s 2022 sanitation strike, or the 2005 catastrophic waste avalanche in Indonesia, to name a few.

The accumulation of evidence documenting the wasting relationship raises the question of how to react, which Armiero narrows down to resilience or resistance. As his argument gravitates towards the latter, he wraps up his *Element* in chapter 5 with examples of international commoning practices proven effective to counter the wasting process and restructure human relationships. The People’s Solidarity Brigades mobilized to support victims of COVID-19, the 2010 *Waste Land* documentary on the waste pickers association in Brazil’s Jardim Gramacho, and the local movements that have responded to the toxic aftermath of the Balkan war in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the industrial

pollution affecting the Spanish city of Can Sant Joan exemplify life within the Wasteocene and the collective efforts to resist its advance and revert the damage.

In the brief coda, Armiero draws on the coincidence of the finalization of his manuscript and his personal experience with COVID-19 to show that standing out among the side effects of this global health crisis is the visible manifestation of the unequal socioeconomic structure underpinning the Wasteocene and the intensification of the wasting process. He references the previously documented commoning initiatives to confirm the effectiveness of this strategy to resist the normalizing dynamic of the Wasteocene.

Just as Armiero maintains that the Wasteocene is grounded in waste relationships in which the disposal of “our” waste creates the “other”, Samuel Amago proposes that the Spanish transition to democracy required that the legacy of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975) be erased, or trashed, to make space for a new Spain whose modernity and progress depended on (at least) the projection of cleanliness in myriad aspects. This agenda thus singles out waste as an undeniable object and motor shaping contemporary Spain. *Basura*, however, is not about the contents of trash. Drawing on Alfredo González-Ruiz’s invitation to study art and archaeology together, Amago labels *Basura* an archaeological project that delves into contemporary Spanish waste to lay bare the context that produced it, namely “the country’s uneven process of political, social, and cultural modernization” (26). *Basura* convincingly brings contemporary Spain into the Waste Studies conversation. The topic is not new to Hispanic Studies as the path was lit by *Teoría general de la Basura (cultura, apropiación, complejidad)* [Galaxia Gutenberg, 2018], by Agustín Fernández Mallo, and *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste* (Vanderbilt UP, 2019), by Maite Zubiaurre, among others. Through its effective narrowing of the gap between Hispanic Studies and Waste Studies, *Basura* renovates the bookshelf of surveys of Spanish culture, offering an innovative reassessment that validates the discourse of waste’s capacity to generate a creative counternarrative.

Similarly, what makes this book valuable for those interested in bringing together Waste Studies and the Humanities is its examination of trash’s role in culture and art and the role that creativity plays in how we understand and care for the environment. In his introduction Amago inserts his study in the context of the Spanish transition to democracy and explicates how Waste Studies offers a critical approach flexible enough to navigate the distinct cultural practices selected to illuminate trash’s presence and significance. The six chapters that follow are divided equally into two parts that reveal different manifestations of waste in contemporary Spanish culture. The first part, entitled “Waste Matters”, finds in Pedro Almodóvar’s 1980s film oeuvre (chapter 1), the 2013 Madrid sanitation workers’ strike (chapter 2), and the photography portfolio of Óscar Carrasco and Jordi Bernadó (chapter 3) evidence of “waste” that “matters” and whose erasure was required to modernize the Spanish urban space, thereby converting this “matter” into the depository of that space’s history.

A chief insight running through Part One is that the discourse of cleanliness oversees the transformation of Spanish urban space. The garbage trucks, sanitation

workers, and rubbish, especially plastics, that abound in Almodóvar's *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1980) and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1984) construct a cinematic presentation of waste's agency in the design of a new and clean urban space. Amago observes that waste imagery disappears from Almodóvar's twenty-first century oeuvre, a sign of Spain's achievement of urban modernity (57). Waste is inevitable, however, and contemporary social and economic structures rely on its invisibility to secure the seamless functioning of capitalism and a pristine national image. Notwithstanding that effort, the accumulation of trash on the capital city streets came to a head in the November 2013 week-long sanitation workers' strike. The ensuing point of contention between workers and the local political administration brings to light the intersection and interconnection between economic and political power, waste disposal, and urban development. In an analysis that aligns *Basura* with *Wasteocene*, Amago studies the strike through the media attention received in Twitter and the daily newspaper *El País*. Amago does not justify his selection of print media and it is possible that a reader may be left wondering if and how the other national newspapers and digital press outlets treated the strike, or if they trashed it altogether. Irregardless, the inclusion of the strike in *Basura* is fitting because it expands the scope of spaces and creative mediums where waste and wasting works itself out. Amago's discussion of trash's political power also tightens the points where *Basura* and *Wasteocene* intersect. Finally, the photographic engagement of wasted spaces in Madrid and Barcelona is an example of waste's generative capacity, another key thread running throughout *Basura*. In chapter 3 Amago turns to this idea through the study of Jordi Bernadó's *Welcome to España* (2010) and Óscar Carrasco's 2014 exhibition at Madrid's Fragua de Tabacalera, showing how the photography of modern urban ruins creates a visual archive of spaces and practices deemed useless or disposable for the nation's democratic future.

In the second part, "Waste Humanism", the author changes gears to focus on instances and consequences of waste's interaction with the human body, a line of inquiry aligned with Armiero's spotlighting of the wasted body. Amago studies this image and reality in different literary genres, thus revealing waste's appeal and attraction to contemporary Spanish literature. The section begins with a reading of Benjamín Prado's 2006 *Mala gente que camina*, a historical novel that epitomizes contemporary Spanish fiction's inquiry into the national past. The subject of the stolen babies during the Franco dictatorship, historical memory, and the ethics of discarding and saving that memory construct the narrative scaffolding of *Mala gente que camina*. This chapter delivers a precise close reading of how the novel—Prado's and the genre in general—excavates and recovers the historical memory Spain's rapid modernization erased. Chapter 5 addresses the effective role of comic books in bringing to the fore the human consequences of the economic crisis. *Aquí vivo: Historia de un desahucio* (2016), written by Isaac Rosa and illustrated by Cristina Bueno, and *Barcelona; Los vagabundos de la chitarra* (2015), by Sagar Forniés and Jorge Carrión, make visible trash's bearing on the politics of space. Here Amago scrutinizes how these graphic narratives bring to the center evictions and the exclusion of wasted communities composed of immigrants and victims of the housing crisis in Madrid and Barcelona. The final chapter of *Basura* extends the scope of waste

from the material sphere to the constitution of selfhood. In this turn, Amago examines human materiality and deterioration, or its junking, in Rosa Montero's *La hija del caníbal* (1997) and *La carne* (2016). His analysis highlights how the strategies of metafiction facilitate the characters' self-awareness of their relationship to waste.

Basura is an ambitious project that—to borrow from the waste glossary—rummages through an eclectic cultural archive: film, photography, print and digital media, novels, and comic books. Its theoretical framework is equally eclectic, drawing on critical waste scholarship by Thierry Bardini, Maurizia Boscagli, Neil Brenner, Mary Douglas, Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, Rem Koolhaas, John Scanlan, Maite Zubiaurre, as well as Spanish Cultural Studies bibliography by Malcolm Compitello, Susan Larson, Matthew Feinberg, among others. The author justifies his method as consistent with waste's own diversity, and he handles the eclecticism with skill by cross-referencing between chapters and constantly referencing them back to his central argument, thereby reminding the reader of the bigger picture that frames his subject. Finally, the color plates that handsomely illustrate *Basura* reinforce the book's mission to keep waste visible.

The ideal reader of these volumes is not just a scholar of Environmental or Hispanic Studies but also a general reader, specifically, a concerned citizen, or an individual interested in becoming one, committed to creating and maintaining a clean and salubrious environment for all. The success of *Wasteocene* and *Basura*, for this reader, lies in the valuable lessons these books offer specialists and the non-academic audience alike about how society wastes and thinks about waste. Armiero and Amago's publications will surely enrich and renovate research and teaching and will be consulted as Waste Studies continues to evolve and grow.

Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell
Goethe University, Germany
k.bartha.mitchell@gmail.com

Parham, John, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 313 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4891>



The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene, edited by John Parham, presents the latest edited collection in what seems to be an abundance of publications of the past seven years or so on literary and cultural perspectives on the Anthropocene. The 2010s witnessed the emergence of this theme mainly through essays and monographs that grappled with the meaning of the term, often contesting it by creatively coining alternative names.¹ As time passes, more collected volumes provide overviews and entry points into this rich new field, firmly enshrining the Anthropocene as a key concept for Ecocriticism. Examples for recent collections on this topic include Tobias and Taylor's *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (2017), and the special edition of *C21* edited by De Cristofaro and Cordle, "Literature of the Anthropocene" (2018). In fact, ecocritical publications with various foci such as climate, environmental humanities, affect, posthumanism, material ecocriticism, and transculturality, are appearing at such a fast pace, it is hard to keep up.² These collections also suggest, however, that ecocritical overviews of these relatively new fields are much needed.

Another aspect that stands out in recent volumes concerns the term 'environment:' the proliferation of specific foci, such as the Anthropocene or materiality, seems to suggest that we are entering a period of greater differentiation of the term 'environment,' that the ever more complex phenomena we are experiencing require an ever more expanding or differentiating vocabulary. Perhaps, then, 'environment' has become a tired concept in need of renewal, refinement, and rearticulation. Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin have argued this very point in *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (2018): although the popularity of this "crisis-concept" is a trans-disciplinary achievement that came to outdo terms such as conservation, preservation, or biosphere, they suggest it may

¹ An important example is Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016).

² See for example, Johns-Putra's *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, 2022; Cohen and Foote's *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environmental Humanities*, 2021; Bladow and Ladino's *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, 2018; Bruce and Rossini's *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Posthumanism*, 2018; Iovino and Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism*, 2014; and Cooke and Denney's *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic, and Decolonial Perspectives*, 2021.

by now be “politically exhausted” (23-24; 173). Of course, it is also important to note that while said volumes have specific foci, such as climate and Anthropocene, they necessarily overlap, as the Anthropocene can be understood as an umbrella term for various socio-ecological issues. This broad use, however, is where many publications falter (or at least dilute the specific uses and merits, of the term Anthropocene). Not so in this case.

The *Companion* under review does indeed present, as the cover promises, “the most comprehensive survey yet” of the intersections of literature and the Anthropocene, and includes global contexts and literatures. In the “Introduction,” Parham defines the Anthropocene through its futurity, arguing that “the Anthropocene presages an altered future” and that “literature might help us live in that future” (1). With the exception of the two ‘keynote’ essays under the rubric “Prologue,” Laura Dassow Walls’ “Earth” and Sean Cubitt’s “Data/Anecdote,” (which I address in a moment), most chapters are written in a highly accessible style, serving the purpose of a first introduction into the various enquiries. The *Companion* is divided into two main domains: “Anthropocene Forms” and “Anthropocene Themes.” This structure reflects that next to perhaps more obvious themes such as “Fossil Fuel” (Sam Solnick), “Humans” (Hannes Bergthaller) and “Warming” (Andreas Malm), literary scholarship on the Anthropocene has brought about highly significant reflections on new fields, such as Ecomedia, as well as old preoccupations, such as genre, narrative, and scale. As the volume points out so well, the Anthropocene has inspired new forms, such as climate fiction, but, as Astrid Bracke notes, it has also been productive for a review of older forms and periods (89).

What is notable is the *Companion*’s front- and backmatter: not only does it include a helpful “Further Reading” section, but it also starts with an inspiring Chronology, a timeline which shows relevant geological dates and events associated with the Anthropocene, such as “1880-1900: Sea levels begin to rise” alongside relevant literary works of that era: “1895: H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*.” This juxtaposition of cultural consciousness and planetary changes can be traced back earlier than intuition would have us sometimes do. The literary works presented in this timeline are not meant to be representative, but largely consist of works discussed in the volume—an idea that was helpful as an entry point.

The two front-line essays of the volume are complex but rewarding: Walls argues that the “nineteenth century is the nearest way to discover the roots of both our insight and our blindness” (50), showing the role that writers and geologists played for a sense of planetarity and a revival of the notion of ‘cosmos.’ Walls thus proposes that the consciousness of a warming climate was very much present in intellectual cultures of the nineteenth century. Cubitt’s essay presents a much-needed consideration of the convergence of literary studies and new media-technologies in relation to the Anthropocene, arguing that the other-than-human environment “now includes the informational equivalent of the factory environment, technologies that chatter among themselves at speeds beyond our comprehension, as well as a world increasingly hostile to the survival of our species” (56). Using the power of anecdote as an example that “an appeal to common sense can trump data,” Cubitt proposes that the Anthropocene quest is “to become human in a different relation to natural and technical environments in rapid

evolution” (56). His contribution is one of the most interesting of the volume, perhaps because it presents the most neglected dimension of cultural Anthropocene scholarship. However, the essay could have been written more accessibly. I wondered, too, why the *Companion’s* title excludes the terms ‘culture’ and ‘media,’ given that Cubitt’s essay is front and centre, and given the volume’s helpful breadth, which includes gaming (Alenda Y. Chang’s “Digital Games”), design (Stanislav Roudavski’s “Interspecies Design”), and activism (Zainor Izat Zainal’s “Ethics”).

Altogether, the highly worthwhile essays collected in this volume avoid falling into the trap of many recent publications that use the Anthropocene as backdrop, or as synonymous with ‘environmental crisis,’ as can be found in the schema ‘XX in the Anthropocene.’ The *Companion* thus successfully conveys what sets Anthropocene scholarship apart from ‘just’ an environmental lens: an engagement with materiality of the Earth, media-technologies, historicity and futurity, scale and narrative, activism, and a wider pool of disciplines used to bring these knowledges together. Most importantly, the volume avoids perpetuating a universalist decline-narrative so often criticised in the Anthropocene debate: by including perspectives on ethics, activism, and productive solutions, it serves, as is stated to be its aim in the Acknowledgements, “a more pleasurable purpose as well” (xii).

Works Cited

- Bladow, Kyle and Jennifer Ladino, editors. *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. Nebraska UP, 2018
- Clarke, Bruce and Manuela Rossini, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Posthumanism*. Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Cohen, Jeffrey and Stephanie Foote, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environmental Humanities*. Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Cooke, Stuart and Peter Denney, editors. *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic, and Decolonial Perspectives*. Bloomsbury, 2021.
- De Cristofaro, Diletta and Daniel Cordle, editors. “Literature of the Anthropocene.” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, vol. 6, no.1, 2018.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana UP, 2014.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline and Kelly Sultzbach, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*. Cambridge UP, 2022
- Menely, Tobias and Jesse Oak Taylor, editors. *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*. Penn State UP, 2017.
- Robin, Libby, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, *The Environment: A History of the Idea*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2018.

Stefan Hecht
Université de Strasbourg, France
stefan.hecht2@etu.unistra.fr

Aurélie Choné, Philippe Hamman, Hrsg., *Die Pflanzenwelt im Fokus der Environmental Humanities. Le végétal au défi des Humanités environnementales* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 350 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2023.14.1.4901>



Weltweit stehen ökologische Krisen im Interesse von Öffentlichkeit und Wissenschaften. Der Zulauf zu den *Environmental Humanities* seit der letzten Jahrtausendwende und die fortschreitende Ausbreitung dieses Wissenschaftsgebietes ist symptomatisch für den Bedarf, Mensch-Umwelt-Beziehungen neu zu überdenken. Der vorliegende 2021 publizierte Sammelband¹ beleuchtet die *Environmental Humanities*, die Antworten suchen angesichts der zunehmenden Dringlichkeit umweltrelevanter Fragen, mit denen Gesellschaft, Wissenschaft und Politik konfrontiert sind. Dynamiken und Vergleiche² zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland bilden den Hauptansatz, wobei Pflanzen im Vordergrund des Buches stehen. Der Band besteht aus einer Einführung und 11 Aufsätzen in deutscher oder französischer Sprache. Er ist in zwei Teile gegliedert, einen ersten, der den neueren institutionellen und epistemologischen Status und die Herausforderungen der *Environmental Humanities* durchmisst, sowie einen zweiten, der sich Fallstudien—Gärten und Wälder—widmet.

In ihrer Einführung und einem Kapitel im ersten Teil gehen die Herausgeber*in Aurélie Choné und Philippe Hamman auf den Schwerpunkt des Bandes und die Herausforderungen der *Environmental Humanities* (EH) ein. Begründet wird der Fokus auf Gärten und Wälder damit, dass es sich um Orte handle, an denen sich der (kulturelle) Umgang mit Natur verdichtet. Die derzeitige Umweltkrise stelle die EH vor die Frage, wie es denn überhaupt so weit kommen konnte, fordere sie aber auch dazu heraus, Strategien der Resilienz aufzuzeigen. Aspekte von Natur befinden sich im Schnittfeld aller

¹ Der Band geht auf ein internationales Kolloquium am Collège doctoral européen de Strasbourg 2018 zurück.

² Im Detail geht der Beitrag „Die *Environmental Humanities* im deutschsprachigen Raum: Erste Forschungszentren, Ansätze und Perspektiven“ von Hubert Zapf und Evi Zemanek auf institutionelle Partikularitäten der beiden Länder bzw. auf die Forschungslandschaft im deutschsprachigen Raum ein. Der wohl markanteste Unterschied zu Frankreich ist, dass es in Deutschland eigene Forschungszentren wie das Rachel Carson Center der LMU München gibt. 2022 hat sich mit dem MESH der Universität Köln ein weiterer internationaler Forschungsstandort der *Environmental Humanities* etabliert. Erstmals wird seit 2022 nun auch in Frankreich ein expliziter (Master-) Studiengang *Environmental Humanities* (Humanités environnementales) von der Universität Nantes angeboten.

Disziplinen. Damit hängt ein zentrales Element des Forschungsfelds der EH zusammen: Der Dialog zwischen den Disziplinen, insbesondere zwischen Natur-, Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften, aber auch unter Einbeziehung von Kunst. Darüber hinaus ist man sich bewusst, dass Umweltprobleme eine planetare Dimension haben und dass der Umgang mit Natur immer kulturell bedingt ist. Daraus ergibt sich zum einen die Notwendigkeit, globale Demokratie bzw. Gerechtigkeit zu berücksichtigen. Zum anderen seien Forschung und Forschende herausgefordert, die analytisch-reflexive Ebene nicht von Handlung und Praxis zu trennen. Das Buch folgt dieser Linie, insofern die Beiträge der in Literatur, Soziologie, Umweltstudien und Urbanismus spezialisierten und in den EH ausgewiesenen Autor*innen sich insgesamt durch die Kooperation mit naturwissenschaftlichen Disziplinen bzw. Akteur*innen auszeichnen.

Urte Stobbe fokussiert in ihrem Beitrag die neue Beschäftigung mit der Pflanzenwelt, welche sich in der Formierung der Plant Studies spiegelt. Lakonisch hält sie fest, „Pflanzen sind die neuen Tiere“. Pflanzen—ähnlich wie Tiere in den Animal Studies—literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlich so zu konzipieren, dass sie als handlungsfähige Akteur*innen zur Sprache kommen, ziehe tiefgreifende philosophische Reflexionen und potentielle ethische Konsequenzen nach sich. Die konkreten sozialen und psychischen Bedeutungen und Effekte, andere Mit-Geschöpfe als minderwertig zu konstituieren—und also auch im Fall von Pflanzen von Speziesismus zu sprechen—, führt die Autorin überzeugend anhand der Analyse des Romans *Pfaueninsel* vor. Dass es aber bereits lange vor den aktuellen *turns* und der Zuspitzung der Umweltkrise, entgegen einer weitverbreiteten utilitaristischen Haltung gegenüber Pflanzen, vereinzelt Tendenzen gab, Pflanzen als lebendigen Teil von Landschaft zu begreifen und als beseelt und handlungsmächtig zu imaginieren, illustriert Corinne Fournier Kiss mit einer aufschlussreichen Analyse ausgewählter Texte von Rousseau, Goethe, George Sand und Hesse, bei denen das Eigenleben von Pflanzen Fürsprache findet. Hildegard Haberl perspektiviert in ihrem Aufsatz die heutige Garteneuphorie kulturgeschichtlich und spannt einen Bogen zwischen *ecocriticism* und Romantik. Hierzu stellt sie dem *environmental turn* den Mythos Garten als Rückzugs- und Schutzraum, dem *spatial turn* die Idee des Gartens als Heterotopie und dem *emotional turn* den literarischen Raum Garten als Ort der Sinnlichkeit sowie des Fühlens gegenüber.

Jawad Daheur geht (in Teil 1) der Geschichte der Wälder in Deutschland und Frankreich nach und beschreibt deren gegenseitige Beeinflussung von Waldbaumethoden, aber auch die Zirkulation von Waldwissen und Holzfragen—Forstschulen, Handel und Konsum—über den europäischen Rahmen hinaus. Sehr vielversprechend ist sein Hinweis auf das Potenzial, das in der Kultivierung einer globalen Geschichte bzw. Geschichtsschreibung der Wälder steckt. Konkret wird in den Fallstudien zu Wäldern gezeigt, dass das Leben mit Wäldern nicht erst seit dem 18. Jahrhundert eine Koevolution sowie ein gegenseitiges Sich-Formen darstellt.³ Aus anthropozentrischer Perspektive mag die Ressource Holz oder der Klimafaktor Wald im Vordergrund stehen,

³ An dieser Stelle sei auch auf das 2020 erschienene Buch *Der Wald in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts. Geschichte einer romantisch-realistischen Ressource* von Klara Schubenz verwiesen.

aber Vorstellungen von Wald wie Urwald, Holznot oder Waldsterben machen auch etwas mit den Menschen. Nach Michel Dupuy, der von der (De-)Konstruktion von Waldvorstellungen spricht, sei unser gegenwärtiges Bild von Wäldern von einer Nachhaltigkeitspolitik geprägt, die vor 400 Jahren propagiert wurde.⁴ Das Anthropozän akzentuiere die (forstlichen) Herausforderungen zum Umgang mit Wald. Imaginäre Bilder von einem Modellwald spielen hier eine Schlüsselrolle. Sie korrelieren mit Vorstellungen von Natürlichkeit. Diese Vorstellungen stellen einen Referenzzustand dar und dienen—in Form von naturnahem Wald, Dauerwald—im Rahmen des derzeitigen Waldmanagements in Frankreich und in Deutschland mehr oder weniger als *ein* Leitbild. Dem gegenüber stehen Interessengruppen und Akteur*innen, die wirtschaftlich-pragmatisch argumentieren. Der Beitrag von Paul Averbeck, Florence Rudolf und Julie Gobert analysiert aus unterschiedlichen Blickwinkeln diese Spannungen, denen der Wald(bau) im Zeitalter des Klimawandels ausgesetzt ist und welche Rolle das Nicht-Eingreifen dabei spielt. Ungewissheit bleibe bestehen, wie sehr der Wald genutzt oder geschont werden dürfe bzw. müsse. Dem Wald möglichst viel Autonomie zugestehen und als Vorbild studieren, oder Natur und Menschen mit technischen Eingriffen zum Überleben verhelfen? Diese Unsicherheiten trüben den Blick in die Zukunft. Als konstruktiv wird aber die Berücksichtigung der Multifunktionalität der Wälder sowie der Dialog verschiedener Akteur*innen ausgegeben. Die Frage eines adäquaten Verhaltens im Anthropozän ist auch Gegenstand des Artikels von Anne-Marie Pailhès, in dem sie retrospektiv das (wissenschaftlich betreute) Experiment des Ökodorfes *Sieben Linden* zwischen 1999 und 2010 untersucht.⁵ Der Beitrag passt zwar weniger in die Kategorie ‚Gärten‘ im klassischen Sinn, aber er führt vor Augen, dass ein radikaler Ausstieg aus dem System—ein Rückzug in den Garten—zumindest ambivalent, wenn nicht illusorisch ist.

Für nicht zweisprachige Rezipient*innen hätten die eher knappen Zusammenfassungen in beiden Sprachen am Ende ausführlicher sein können. Gerade was Bäume und Wälder anbelangt, wäre es interessant gewesen, auf die Frage, ob Individualität bei Pflanzen eine Rolle spielt, einzugehen. Davon abgesehen bietet der Band einen guten Einblick in die aktuellen EH und ihre Beschäftigung mit Vegetabilität und Mensch-Pflanze-Beziehungen. Er geht auf mehrere wichtigen Bezugspunkte wie Tiefenökologie, Umweltethik- und Psychologie sowie Wirtschaft ein. Zudem ist er reich mit Referenzen versehen und verfügt über historisch versierte ebenso wie an aktuelle Problemlagen anschließende Perspektiven. So weisen Beiträge, die sich mit der Vergangenheit des Natur-Kultur-Verhältnisses beschäftigen, auf einen Bezug zu gegenwärtigen Problematiken (und umgekehrt) und konstatieren die Dynamiken der Herausbildung, Forcierung und Tradierung von Natur-Kultur-Konstellationen. Besonders mit dem deutsch-französischen Vergleich von Wäldern ist es gelungen, die fortwährende gegenseitige Bezogenheit im Umweltgeschehen anschaulich zu machen, nicht zuletzt

⁴ Als Referenzwerk für Nachhaltigkeit sei folgendes wiederholt zitierte Werk genannt: Carlowitz, Hans Carl von, *Sylvicultura oeconomia. Oder Haußwirthliche Nachricht und naturmäßige Anweisung zur wilden Baum-Zucht*, Leipzig, 1713.

⁵ Eine gute Übersicht hierzu in: Andreas Marcus, *Vom neuen guten Leben. Ethnographie eines Ökodorfes*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2015.

Author: Hecht, Stefan Title: Aurélie Choné, Philippe Hamman, Hrsg., Die Pflanzenwelt im Fokus der Environmental Humanities. Le végétal au défi des Humanités environnementales

zwischen lokaler, nationaler, europäischer und globaler Ebene. Aus der demonstrierten Nähe zwischen Theorie und Praxis ergeben sich Anregungen, die die Lektüre des Buches, auch für Interessierte, die nicht vom Fach sind, empfehlenswert machen.

The logo for Ecozon@, featuring a stylized plant or leaf symbol above the text 'Ecozon@'.

Vol 14, No 1

Mònica Tomàs White
Rutgers University, USA
mat344@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová, eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 250 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4904>



Whereas much research on climate change and narrative genre focuses on science fiction (see, for example, Ghosh 2016, Heise 2019), *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová, (2022) fills a gap in Anthropocene literary studies by turning to fantasy and myth as spaces for imagining biocentric alternatives. Eschewing perceptions of these modes as unrealistic and indulgent, contributors demonstrate that they engage in vital mediation with nonhuman others, resituating humans within a broad spectrum of being. Editors Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová choose to center visions of sustainable, rather than dystopian, futures; accordingly, many chapters examine works directed at young people, which are more likely to end happily in accordance with their readers' aspirations for a livable future. The volume intersperses academic chapters with illustrations and personal reflections by creators of young people's literature: the result is an eclectic and engaging collection that advances the crucial work of guiding both young and not-so-young readers through the strange and uncertain times of the Anthropocene.

Part I of the book, "Trouble in the Air," contemplates the possibilities fantasy and myth offer as modes and structures of storytelling. Brian Attebery reflects on the epochal framings of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy (2015-17), and John Crowley's *Ka* (2017) to examine how fantasy can show what happens after worlds end. Temporality and change are of similar concern in Lindsay Burton's chapter, which argues that Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* (2011) invites readers to "play with the trouble," engaging with ongoing learning while centering young people as valuable kin. Alexander Popov's chapter focuses on how fantasy literature's representation of nonhuman perspectives allows readers to encounter multinatural ecologies; likewise, Marek Oziewicz calls upon fantasy literature to counter the ecocidal fantasy of human exceptionalism with what he calls "planetarianism," a counternarrative of hope and resistance. The personal reflections in this section similarly contemplate how myth and fantasy offer alternate perspectives and possibilities through strategies ranging from imagining "if only" stories to writing from the perspective of planet Earth itself.

Manifestations of biocentric perspectives in specific works of fantastic literature are the subject of Part II, "Dreaming the Earth." Tereza Dědinová analyzes how witchcraft

in Terry Pratchett's Tiffany Aching series (1983-2015) parallels permaculture ethics, resituating humans in the more-than-human world. Relationships with nonhuman others form the crux of Melanie Duckworth's argument that Margaret Mahy's (1936-2012) novels recognize trees as kin rather than resources, as well as of Stephanie J. Weaver's examination of how the coexistence of humans and (fantastic) nonhumans in J.K. Rowling's (b. 1965) work models futures that are neither human utopias nor human-free wildernesses. Finally, Aneesh Barai shows how queer romance and loving connection with enemies in animated series *The Legend of Korra* (2012-14), *She-Ra* (2018-20), and *Steven Universe* (2013-20) are central to anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles against climate crisis. The personal reflections also seek connection with a plurality of nonhuman others, from seagrass and weevils to willow warblers and Ecuadorian palms.

Part III, "Visions in the Water," examines retellings of foundational myths about human relationships with the oceans. John Rieder explores how Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) rewrites the myth of the Flood to wash away harmful neoliberal fantasies, leaving behind a hopeful vision of socio-ecological transformation. Meanwhile, Prema Arasu and Drew Thornton argue that kinship between humans and piscine creatures in the films *Ponyo* (2008) and *The Shape of Water* (2017) counter human exceptionalism, producing a broader, tentacular relationality. Polynesian stories are at the heart of the next two chapters: Christopher D. Foley argues that Disney's *Moana* (2016) expresses a Global North "energy unconscious" at the cost of the problematic reduction of the trickster figure Maui, whereas Caryn Lesuma considers Kānaka Maoli youth's potential for meeting environmental challenges in two niuhi mo'olelo (man-eating shark stories), Lehua Parker's *The Niuhi Shark Saga* (2016-19) and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada's story "All My Relations" (2017). This section's personal reflections interrogate the potential of myths and stories to lead readers away from the stupor of consumerism and into the wider more-than-human world.

Part IV, "Playing with Fire," turns to fantasy and myth interrogating the limits of human agency during processes of world creation and destruction. Derek J. Thiess argues that in its attempt to challenge an anthropocentric system, N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy privileges the dominant Christian religious mythic structures undergirding ecological domination. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015) is one example of what Jacob Burg calls "myths of (un)creation," that is, narratives that imagine ways past world destruction through temporal estrangement and the reimagining of kin work. Another example might be Jeff Vandermeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014), which Kim Hendrickx reads as a speculative ecology that challenges notions of human mastery as well as colonial fantasies of domination. However, sometimes fantasy works occlude ecological complexity: such is the case of *Game of Thrones* (2011-19), which Markus Laukkanen argues abandons the complex representation of climate hyperobjects in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present). This section's creative contributions reimagine myths of humanity, asking questions about how stories are created, shared, and transmuted into hopeful futures.

Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene spans a wide range of texts and media, from a short-form children's animated series about sentient gems (*Steven Universe*) to thrill

rides (at Universal Studios' Wizarding World of Harry Potter). The book's profusion of subjects and clarity of language will make this book compelling reading for scholars of narrative genre while remaining accessible to undergraduate readers. Although several authors garner repeated entries, these well-known stories' broader readership may make them particularly conducive to discussions of the "collective dreaming" fantasy and myth engender (6). Fantasy and myth prove to be somewhat unstable categories, with some contributors departing from the introductory definitions in order to examine fantasies as delusions and myths as harmful falsehoods; at times, this confuses the book's investigative thrust. Nevertheless, this study clearly articulates the relationship between storytelling and imagining paths through the narrative morass of the Anthropocene.

Works Cited

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The U of Chicago P, 2016.
- Heise, Ursula. "Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene." *English Literary History (ELH)*, vol. 86, n. 2, Summer 2019, pp. 275-304.

Caroline Granger
University of Caen Normandy, France
ontheroad.granger@gmail.com

Cary Wolfe, *Art and Posthumanism, Essays, Encounters, Conversations* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 226 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4892>



In *Art and Posthumanism, Essays, Encounters, Conversations*, Cary Wolfe gathers most of his essays from 2004 to 2020 together with an artist's interview. A Publication History is included at the end of the collection, clarifying which of these writings are combinations or portions of chapters adapted from previous works. Thus brought together, these fragments "resonate with and enhance each other" (vii) to highlight the author's approach to posthumanism, braiding theory and analyses of specific artworks. As a result, this book sheds light on visual art using seminal works by German systems theory thinker Niklas Luhmann, French philosophers Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault as well as Italian biopolitics philosopher Giorgio Agamben to name but a few.

The collection includes twelve contributions, organized in three parts. The opening of the book, titled "In Lieu of an Introduction: A Conversation with Giovanni Aloi," consists of an interview that effectively lays the foundations of the book. Wolfe here introduces his key concepts and the works of the visual artists under study in the various chapters. This unusual introduction tightly knits together the collection of originally scattered writings. The following parts are composed of three or four sections each, with each individual section focusing on works by a single artist. Images in black and white are inserted throughout, offering precious glimpses of the works discussed. In addition, high-quality color plates included in the last pages invite readers to create further connections beyond words.

Under the heading "Systems: Social, Biological, Ecological," Part One focuses on how art is perceived, how it can trigger new ways of relating to the living world, and how experiencing art may change our thinking. First, the study of Ricardo Scofidio and Elizabeth Diller's project, *Blur* (2002) allows the author to discuss the issues of representation, imitation, and visibility in art. The second chapter demonstrates how Koolhaas and Mau's *Tree City* (2000) offers an immersive experience of openness through the mix of "green and gray ecologies" (43). This landscape architecture functions as a part of a larger social system and questions spatial and temporal boundaries that are later analyzed by the posthumanist approach. In the last section, Wolfe refers to Bateson and Derrida to explain the "queasiness" (55) brought about by Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic*

Ground (2010). Indeed, this installation produces an immersive environment where boundaries are unsettled. It explores an in-between space that challenges dichotomies such as human/nonhuman, or life/death.

Part Two deals with “The Animal” in four sections. The first chapter invites readers to rethink their relationships with nonhuman animals through philosophy and artistic representationalism. Here, the author decides to abandon the “message” of an artwork and rather focuses on the “formal strategies” (68) that reveal what does not appear at first sight. Referring to Derrida’s “carnophallogocentrism”, Wolfe first explores the power of Sue Coe’s paintings dealing with slaughterhouses. He explains that their impact on viewers does not come from their visual violence but from their composition implying fragmentation and repetition. Wolfe then scrutinizes Eduardo Kac’s installations that rely on transgenic life-forms revealing “an autopoietic becoming” (86) and casting light on another aspect of what posthumanism can be. In the next chapter, the author moves from the birth and spread of human exceptionalism to Derrida’s and Haraway’s groundbreaking works on that matter. Wolfe shows how Deke Weaver’s performance piece *Monkey* (2009) invites us to envision a different history where the first humans did come into being by themselves but as they relied on nonhuman animals. To enhance this shift in the writing of history, the author looks into Mark Wilson and Bryndís H. Snæbjörnsdóttir exhibition *Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories* (2014). This third section moves from photographs showing extinct California condors to a study on the roles of archives. These numbered dead nonhuman animals appear as archives of our common history: they are dead because of the world we created. The last chapter takes up the concepts studied in the three first parts. Michael Pestel’s installation, *Martha’s Peel* (2014) allows the author to revisit the issue of invisibility through the disappearance of the last passenger pigeon, to denounce the toxic impact of anthropocentrism, and to deal with the importance of rewriting our common history. Faced with the pigeon Martha’s death, viewers understand that their *oikos* is connected with the one Martha used to inhabit, spurring them to rethink their mode of dwelling. In the end, this questions the process of “de-extinction” made possible by manipulating the genetic code of the vanished bird. It shows the limits of trying to re-create beings separated from their original habitat.

To open Part Three, “The Biopolitical,” the author retraces the various issues debated in the literature on biopolitics before he moves on to a more specific discussion on bioart examined through the lens of biopolitical theory. The author illumines how bioart can be political in unveiling what is hidden in social systems the better to challenge them. Connecting Eduardo Kac or Anthony-Noel Kelly’s controversial artworks with Luhmann’s ideas, the author affirms that art is intertwined with political. The next essay invites us to explore Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s artworks in the light of the following question: “what do domestic space, immigration and colonialism, sexuality, gender and animality have in common?” (151). Space turns out to be a key element at the heart of these notions built on dichotomies (outside/inside, animals/humans) that are questioned by Esposito and Derrida’s “auto-immunitary logic.” Tying in with these matters, the third section consists of an email interview between Wolfe and the Finnish filmmaker. It reaffirms the artist’s will to work respectfully with multiple spaces in order to resist a univocal and

anthropocentric world. The last part deals with “The Biopolitical Drama of Joseph Beuys”. This essay gives a retrospective take onto the artist’s career. The author situates the artist’s early works by providing biographical elements. In particular, he broaches the WWII episode which led the artist to experience a “zone of indistinction” (191) that is reflected in his performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). Tackling the widespread understanding that Beuys is mostly casting a shaman in this performance, Wolfe demonstrates that the artist further questions political bodies.

This must-read book for students and scholars involved in interdisciplinary research does not come to a close with a traditional conclusion. Abiding by what happens in real-life experiences of art, it remains for the reader to ponder the various strands of thought that will be drawn together into meaningful conclusions. Indeed, this important book provides readers with fascinating, crisscrossing paths into Wolfe’s entanglement of contemporary art world and posthumanist theory.

Marco Caracciolo
Ghent University, Belgium
marco.caracciolo@ugent.be

Tom Tyler, *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 248 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4945>



Tom Tyler’s book begins with an observation on the polysemy of the word “game,” which can refer to a playful rule-based activity, to the body (or meat) of a hunted animal, and to a sense of eagerness (as in “being game for something”). But if the meanings of “game” form a triad, the meanings of animals in video games are even more numerous, as Tyler’s book shows through a series of pithy chapters. While grounded in animal studies, the book speaks to debates on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations in the environmental humanities. However, readers expecting a grand theory of animal life in video games or sustained confrontation with the existing scholarship on (for example) posthuman ethics will no doubt be disappointed: Tyler’s argumentation is essayistic, it meanders from one topic to the next with performative flair but also little patience for the technicalities of scholarly discourse. Tyler never claims otherwise; we are already warned in the introduction that the essays “investigate some of the complex and often contradictory ways in which players of video games have been invited to encounter, understand, and engage animals” (3). The formulation is broad, and the scope and variety of the chapters that follow even broader, but there is nevertheless a great deal to be learned from these readings.

Before turning to those intellectual payoffs, though, it is worth remarking on the sheer pleasure of seeing Tyler cover so much ground in such limited space, as in chapter 4, which is an extended digression on the value of enumeration and rumination (and at the same time a manifesto for Tyler’s own digressive method). The chapter starts from a twelfth-century Latin tale about a storyteller who falls asleep in mid-story, then moves on to the practice of counting sheep to fall asleep, then finally homes in on games, and particularly on the “cud-chewing creatures” encountered in games by Jeff Minter, founder of Llamasoft.

While this may sound like mere divertissement, it is anything but shallow: Tyler’s readings position video games within a long cultural history that frequently originates in etymology and takes us to present-day concerns. Chapter 5, for example, revolves around the etymology of the word “inkling” and its unrelatedness to words for juvenile animals such as “duckling”—but also discusses how the game *Splatoon* imaginatively closes this

linguistic gap by placing the player in the role of a squid-like “inkling” who moves around the game world by squirting colors. Most significantly perhaps, Tyler’s chapters confront the ethical demands of including nonhuman animals in the human practice of gaming. Chapter 7, for example, combines the science of fish pain with a reading of Vlambeer’s 2013 mobile game *Ridiculous Fishing* to conclude that “the only kind of fishing worth doing . . . is the virtual variety of *Ridiculous Fishing*” (64). Other chapters situate games within a broadly posthumanist project of undermining anthropocentric thinking, whether it is through the individuality of the boars encountered in *Titan Quest* (chapter 2) or through the unsettling nonhuman agency of pandemics, as performed by the player of *Plague Inc.* (chapter 11). Chapter 9 offers perhaps the most focused discussion of the book, with an overview of the functions of food in games, leading to an insight into the unstable cultural meanings of meat, which “can connote not just power and vitality, but also exposure and vulnerability” (83). The ethical inspiration is, again, clear when Tyler turns to *Super Tofu Boy*, a PETA-commissioned response to an earlier game titled *Super Meat Boy*. Chapter 12 enters the debate on the accessibility of game experiences and asks whether games should necessarily allow players to adjust their difficulty level. Animals drop out of the picture until Tyler, with one of his characteristic twists of argumentation, turns to the way in which nonhumans (from pets to experimental animals) have been implicated in various forms of gaming, becoming not merely an object but a *subject* of inclusive gameplay. This implication demonstrates both the opportunities of play in bridging the human-nonhuman gap and the contradictions inherent in limiting animal freedom in settings such as the zoo and the science lab.

This is an effective and enjoyable way of introducing ethical concerns without telegraphing them: the reader is drawn into Tyler’s witty style and gradually exposed to the difficulties of encountering animals in both games and real life. As the author argues in the final chapter (and at the risk of spoiling here the effect of Tyler’s indirectness) each of the book’s essays “addresses some aspect of game design or mechanics . . . but also, during the course of its exposition, reveals itself as aligning with a vegan sensibility” (150). “Vegan sensibility” is perhaps too narrow, or modest, a phrase, because it seems to me that the essays introduce a much wider range of ethical concerns—relating, for example, to the existential value of frustration in games that cannot be “beaten” (chapter 6) and how such frustration can prove generative in rethinking human-nonhuman relations. While Tyler’s work draws on sources that will be familiar to most animal studies scholars (from Jakob von Uexküll to Anat Pick), the readings offered in *Game* open up new ways of thinking about the form of games, nonhuman animals, and their complex entanglements in human practices. Through its energetic prose, this is a remarkable book that will provide inspiration to many scholars in the fields of ecocriticism and animal studies, as well as any reader who cares about how play—digital, verbal, or both—can take us out of our anthropocentric comfort zone.

Vol.14, no. 1

Mission Statement

This journal of ecocriticism, founded in 2010, is a joint initiative of GIECO (Ecocritical Research Group in Spain) and EASLCE (European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment) and is published by the University of Alcalá as of 2014. Its principal aim is to further the study, knowledge and public awareness of the connections and relationship between literature, culture and the environment. As a virtual space, it provides a site for dialogue between researchers, theorists, creative writers and artists concerned with and by the environment and its degradation. Its pages are open to contributions on all literatures and cultures, but its special mission is to reflect the cultural, linguistic and natural richness and diversity of the European continent.

Contributions, which are subject to double-blind peer review, are accepted in five languages, in order to increase visibility and broaden the participation of scholars who are not part of the English-speaking world. *Ecozon@* publishes original research articles, in addition to creative writing, visual arts and book reviews. Publication is open to scholars interested in ecocriticism from around the world. We recommend membership of EASLCE to our contributors and readers, but it is not a requirement for either.

Ecozon@ is currently indexed in MLA, OAI, DOAJ, ERIH PLUS, Latindex, Dialnet, ISOC and EBUAH, the institutional repository of the University of Alcalá.

Editorial Board

Editor in Chief

Carmen Flys Junquera, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Associate Editor

Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University, USA

Managing Editor

Gala Arias Rubio, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Assistant Production Editor

Beatriz Martin Castro, Alfonso X El Sabio University, Spain

Secretary

Irene Sanz Alonso, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Guest Editors for Special Section Vol. 14, no. 1, 2023

Catrin Gersdorf, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Germany

Catriona Sandilands, York University, Canada

Assistant Editor Special Section

Giulia Disanto, University of Salento, Italy

Assistant Editor General Section

Madeleine Hugai, University of Augsburg, Germany

Book Review Editor

María Isabel Perez Ramos, University of Oviedo, Spain

Book Review Assistant Editor

Sean Matharoo, University of North Carolina, USA

Creative Writing and Arts Editor

Elizabeth Tavella, University of Chicago, USA

Creative Writing and Arts Assistant Editor

Laura op de Beke, Oslo University, Norway

Assistant Editors

Margot Lauwers, University of Perpignan Via Domitia, France

Vanesa Roldán, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Sofie Schrey, Northumbria University, UK

Louise Squire, University of Portsmouth, UK

Assistant Editor for Communications

Alejandro Rivero Vadillo, University of Alcalá, Spain

Assistant Editor for Technological Assistance

Beatriz Lindo Mañas, IE University, Spain

Editorial Assistant

Roberto Interdonato, University of Oxford, UK

Advisory Board

Dr. Damiano Benvegna, Dartmouth, United States

Dr. Hannes Bergthaller, National Chung-Hsing University, Taiwan

Dr. Margarita Carretero González, Universidad de Granada, Spain

Dr. Juan Carlos Galeano, Florida State University, United States

Dr. Catrin Gersdorf, Universität Würzburg, Germany

Dr. Terry Gifford, Universidad de Alicante / Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

Dr. Axel Goodbody, University of Bath, United Kingdom

Dr. Christa Grewe-Volpp, Universität Mannheim, Germany

Dr. Jason Groves, University of Washington, United States

Dr. Ursula K. Heise, UCLA, United States

Dr. Reinhard Hennig, University of Agder, Norway

Dr. Isabel Hoving, University of Leiden, Netherlands

Dr. Serenella Iovino, University of Torino, Italy

Dr. Erin James, University of Idaho, United States

Dr. Richard Kerridge, Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

Dr. Lorraine Kerslake, Universidad de Alicante, Spain

Dr. Maryanne Leone, Assumption University, United States

Dr. Montserrat López Mujica, University of Alcalá, Spain

Dr. Timo Maran, University of Tartu, Estonia

Dr. José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

Dr. Imelda Martín Junquera, Universidad de León, Spain

Dr. Sylvia Mayer, Universität Bayreuth, Germany

Dr. Bénédicte Meillon, University of Perpignan Via Domitia, France
Dr. Serpil Oppermann, Hacettepe University, Turkey
Dr. Christopher Oscarson, Brigham Young University, United States
Dr. Manuela Palacios, Universidad Santiago de Compostela, España
Dr. Stephanie Posthumus, McGill University, Canada
Dr. Luis I Prádanos, Miami University, United States
Dr. Francisco Sáez de Adana Herrero, University of Alcalá, Spain
Dr. Catriona Sandilands, York University, Canada
Dr. Begoña Simal, University of A Coruña, Spain
Dr. Scott Slovic, University of Idaho, United States
Dr. Diana Villanueva Romero, Universidad de Extremadura, Spain
Dr. Alexa Weik von Mossner, University of Klagenfurt, Austria

Issue published 28 April 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1>

Copyright Notice

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution License** that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal (CC BY-NC for articles and CC BY-NC-ND for creative work) unless author requests otherwise.
- b. Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.
- c. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work.

Cover image: dp Patrick



Published by



Sponsored by



Institutional Address

Irene Sanz Alonso
Secretary
Instituto Franklin
Colegio de Trinitarios
C/ Trinidad, 1
28801 Alcalá de Henares
Madrid (Spain)