"To See with Eyes Unclouded": Nonhuman Selves and Semiosis in *Princess Mononoke*

Cynthia Zhang
University of Southern California, USA
cynthia.zhang11@gmail.com

Abstract

Responding to a robust archive of ecocritical work on science fiction, this paper argues for fantasy as a genre that can offer powerful tools for ecological thinking. Focusing on Miyazaki Hayao's 1997 film *Princess Mononoke,* I argue that fantasy's portrayal of an animistic natural world provides a framework for recognizing and respecting the subjectivity of nonhuman persons. Drawing on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's concept of multinatural personhood, this paper analyzes the ways in which animistic fantasy allows Miyazaki to portray plants, animals, and other nonhumans as agential subjects that must be respected. Further, using Eduardo Kohn's work on the materiality of semiosis to examine instances of cross-species communication in *Princess Mononoke,* I argue that the film's expanded conceptions of personhood and language counter anthropocentric narratives of mastery by portraying human knowledge as necessarily limited and incomplete. In turn*,* the acknowledgement of epistemological limits encourages an ethical attitude which resonates with Michael Marder's description of plant-thinking as a mode that acknowledges the importance of the unknown and the unknowable. Ultimately, this paper calls for a consideration of how modes of thought and aesthetic representation that have traditionally fallen outside the purview of the scientific can offer resources for imagining human-nonhuman relations.

Keywords: New animism, multinaturalism, speculative fiction, semiosis, plant-thinking.

Resumen

En repuesta a un amplio archivo de trabajo ecocrítico sobre ciencia ficción, este trabajo argumenta que la fantasía como género puede ofrecer herramientas poderosas al pensamiento ecológico. Centrándome en la película de Hayao Miyazaki de 1997, *La princesa Mononoke*, sostengo que el retrato fantástico de un mundo natural animista proporciona un marco para reconocer y respetar la subjetividad de las personas no-humanas. Partiendo del concepto de persona multinatural de Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, este artículo analiza las formas en que la fantasía animista permite que Miyazaki retrate plantas, animales, y otros agentes no-humanos que deben ser respetados. Además, usando el trabajo de Eduardo Kohn sobre la materialidad de la semiosis para examinar ejemplos de comunicación entre especies en *La princesa Mononoke,* mantengo que, al expandir la concepción de persona y lenguaje, la película se opone a las narrativas antropocéntricas de dominio al mostrar el conocimiento humano como necesariamente limitado e incompleto. A su vez, el reconocimiento de los límites epistemológicos promueve una actitud ética que evoca la descripción de Michael Marder sobre el pensamiento vegetal como un modo que reconoce la importancia de lo desconocido y de lo inescrutable. En definitiva, este trabajo apela a que se considere cómo los modos de pensamiento y de

representación estética que tradicionalmente han quedado fuera del ámbito científico pueden ofrecer recursos para imaginar las relaciones entre humanos y no-humanos.

Palabras clave: Nuevo animismo, multinaturalismo, ficción especulativa, semiosis, pensamiento vegetal.

Introduction: Climate Fiction, Science Fiction, and Fantasy

In this paper, I seek to theorize fantasy as a genre for thinking alternatives to the Anthropocene. Within the burgeoning genre of climate fiction, or cli-fi, many thinkers have pointed to science fiction as a genre with unique potential for "speculat[ing] about future technology and conditions" as they relate to climate change (Trexler 13). However, as Marek Oziewicz points out in his introduction to *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene,* the focus on sci-fi as cli-fi has often occurred at the expense of sci-fi's sibling genre, fantasy (3). If science fiction is still suspect in the eyes of some literary critics because it fails to depict climate change as "actually happening on this earth, at this time," the genre is at least tethered to realism through its citation of scientific theory. By contrast, fantasy, with its ghosts and spirits, is commonly viewed as too tied "to the realm of make-believe" for countering the pressing reality of climate change (Millet).

Contrary to the ways in which sci-fi as cli-fi is often framed as offering potential solutions to climate change, my argument for fantasy as cli-fi focuses on the genre's ability to foster respect for nonhuman forces. My case study here is Miyazaki Hayao's[1] *Princess Mononoke,* a 1997 film focused on the struggle between human townspeople and non-human residents of an old-growth forest. Iron Town, led by the ambitious Lady Eboshi, seeks to expand its ironworks operations by clearing more of the nearby forest; however, they meet resistance from the forest's inhabitants, chief among them the wolf-god Moro and her adopted human daughter, San (also the eponymous Princess Mononoke). Attempting to forge a peace between the two sides is Ashitaka, a prince from the last village of the Emishi who leaves his home after being cursed by a vengeful boar god.

In *Princess Mononoke,* Miyazaki deploys fantasy tropes such as talking animals and forest spirits to portray nonhuman entities as agential beings to whom humans owe an ethical obligation. In doing so, the film critiques the scientific tendency to reduce nature[2] to a passive resource that can be exploited without consequence. In

---

[1] Japanese names, such as Miyazaki's, are written in Japanese order (surname, given name). All other names written in Western order (given name, surname).

[2] In ecocriticism, nature as a term has been critiqued for the ways in which it implies a separation between the realm of human culture and the natural world. At the same time, the ubiquity of the nature/culture divide means that it is difficult to discuss anthropocentrism without deploying these same terms. While leaning more towards Haraway's conceptualization of co-constitutive naturecultures, I use nature and cultures in this paper as provisional terms, similar to poles on a

place of an instrumental view of nature as natural resource, Miyazaki offers animism as an alternative for respectful engagement with the nonhuman world. In invoking animism, I draw specifically on work in the field of New Animism by anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn. While anthropology has historically associated animism with underdeveloped 'primitive' culture, New Animism seeks to rethink animism as a viable mode for trans-human relations. In San and Ashitaka's relationships with the forest, I argue that *Princess Mononoke* offers visions of what Viveiros de Castros calls multinaturalism, or a worldview which sees both humans and nonhumans as possessing personhood. Personhood does not connote uniformity, acknowledging that humans, animals, and plants all constitute very different types of persons. However, in many animist societies, personhood does act as a concept that acknowledges the kinship and layers of mutual dependence between different species. Through San and Ashitaka, two young adults who occupy the space between childhood and adulthood as well as between human and non-human, Miyazaki present models of ethical relations to nature based on the recognition of mutual personhood. If a central function of environmental texts aimed at children "is to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow," Miyazaki's protagonists represent a burgeoning model of ecological citizenship in which adult responsibility means embracing animistic thinking rather than rejecting it as unscientific, childish naivety (Massey and Bradford 109).

Central to multispecies coexistence is the possibility of communication between species. Drawing on Edouardo Kohn's theories of material semiosis, I read *Princess Mononoke* as a film that destabilizes the idea of language as the exclusive marker of humanity. In its attendance to non-verbal and often deeply material forms of communication, the film argues for a consideration of semiosis beyond symbolic language, one in which different forms of embodiment allow access to different modes of communication. Rather than viewing language as an innately human activity, Princess Mononoke argues for an expanded view of language, one in which semiosis is a constitutive element feature of life. Consequently, the task of ecological ethics is to pay attention to non-human forms of communication and to forge what Eduardo Kohn calls trans-species pidgins, or necessarily imperfect ways of communication across species, in service of a multispecies cosmopolitics.

At the same time that *Princess Mononoke* emphasizes the importance of cross-species communication, Miyazaki's portrayal of forms of communications that operate beyond human apprehension generates an atmosphere of respect for the unknown—those beings and process which, unseen and unobserved by humans, nonetheless contribute to the functioning of the world. Life and vital processes occur outside a human frame of reference, and responsible ecological practice must proceed with respect for those forces and entities which elude human perception. Here, plant

---

spectrum rather than an absolute binary. Thus, while iron ore is more natural than forged steel, neither is purely nature nor culture.

life in *Princess Mononoke* plays a vital role in emphasizing the importance of respect for "the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible" (Marder 28). Focusing on the figure of the Forest Spirit, who possesses power over life and death but notably never speaks throughout the film, I argue that vegetal life in *Princess Mononoke* illustrates the importance of non-totalizing epistemologies that acknowledge the limits of knowledge. In this way, the film promotes a vision of ecological thinking that echoes Michael Marder's description of plant thinking as a mode that respects the obscure and hidden elements of life. Plants for Miyazaki thus serve as vital site for theorizing ethical obligations towards non-humans and Others whose difference from the Self can never be fully assimilated or understood.

Princess Mononoke: **Materialist Eco-fable**

On the level of narrative, *Princess Mononoke* functions most clearly as an ecological fable about the dangers of human attempts to master nature. If "[t]he typical young adult cli-fi operates with a dystopian setting, where young protagonists are required to find science-based solutions for severe environmental damage," *Princess Mononoke* presents a far more pessimistic vision of the relationship between ecology and technoscientific ingenuity (Rusvia 88). Miyazaki's critique of environmentally damaging technologies emerges most clearly in the depiction of Iron Town. While Lady Eboshi is in many ways a proto-feminist figure, taking charge of Iron Town and organizing it into a haven for former prostitutes and ostracized lepers, iron itself emerges within the film as a potentially sinister force. It is being hit by an iron ball that transforms the boar god Nago into a many-limbed creature comprised of dark, sludgy worms who attacks Ashitaka's village in the film's opening sequence (Fig. 1). Technological progress, as represented by the muskets and mounted cannons which Iron Town uses in combat against Nago and other adversaries, is linked explicitly to death and contagion: the iron musket wounds Nago, transforming him from a god into a demon driven by hatred and vengeance, and Nago in his turn infects anything he touches so that healthy vegetation withers and die in his wake. Ashitaka manages to kill Nago before he can reach the Emishi village, but he too comes in contact with the boar and is infected by a curse that will slowly kill him. Iron may enrich Lady Eboshi and her citizens, just as fossil fuels enrich those who extract them, but the lingering effects on both human and nonhuman life are decidedly deleterious. Rather than scientific salvation, *Princess Mononoke* draws viewer attention to the ways in which technological development has historically contributed to ecological degradation.

Fig. 1. The boar god Nago, corrupted by anger, charges towards the Emishi village. From Princess Mononoke, dir. Miyazaki Hayao, 1997.

However, Miyazaki's other films complicates any reading of *Princess Mononoke* as a wholesale condemnation of science. From the eponymous steampunk castle of *Howl's Moving Castle* to the meticulously detailed airships in *Laputa in the Sky,* Miyazaki's films exhibit a decided fascination with machinery and the capacities they enable. One of Miyazaki's most prominent eco-heroines prior to San, Nausicaä from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* is a budding young scientist whose care for nonhumans does not contradict her desire to analyze her post-apocalyptic landscape. What Miyazaki critiques in *Princess Mononoke* is therefore not science so much as it is certain worldviews that have historically been aligned with scientific endeavors. Chief among these worldviews is what ecofeminist Val Plumwood terms rationalism, or a philosophy that elevates mind over body while also enforcing a separation between the two terms. Under the influence of rationalism, nature becomes raw matter, an object that to be mastered, controlled, and "tortured to yield up her secrets" to the scientific observer (42). Through denying the agency and ethical demands of nonhuman others, a rationalist, instrumental relationship to nonhuman creates and justifies the conditions for its exploitation.

Iron Town, and in particular Lady Eboshi, functions as Miyazaki's primary nexus for modeling the effects of the instrumentalization of nature. While Lady Eboshi works to protect the citizens of Iron Town and even expresses the desire to help San become a 'normal' human, she does not extend her sympathy to the forest residents who are being negatively affected by Iron Town's expansion. Instead, when Eboshi discusses the prospect of clear-cutting the forest with Ashitaka, she emphasizes that her actions will make Iron Town "the richest land in the world." Eboshi is aware that animals and various entities call the forest home, and with these entities frequently threatening Iron Town, she also has a sense of the forest's inhabitants as intelligent beings. Even so, she dismisses their claim to the forest as less than that of the humans. Anthropocentrism reduces nature to Heideggerian standing reserve, a resource whose value is measured in how much wealth can be extracted from it. The irony of

prioritizing humans over nature, however, is that the human realm is inevitably destroyed along with the non-human world. Out of the desire to protect her town from both human and animal enemies, Lady Eboshi accepts a deal with the opportunistic monk Jigo: in exchange for killing the Forest Spirit and bringing his head to the Emperor, Eboshi and Iron Town will receive imperial protection. However, when Eboshi succeeds in killing the Forest Spirit, the Forest Spirit transforms a vengeful, angry creature whose rampage in search of his head destroys both the forest and Iron Town. As the corrupted form of the Forest Spirit flows over the land, its dark, viscous liquidity is reminiscent of both toxic sludge and the molten iron produced in Iron Town (Fig. 2). In the visual similarities to molten iron, there is a sense of karmic irony as Iron Town is destroyed by the product that promised its success in the first place. Similarly, the Anthropocene has frequently been framed as a pyrrhic victory for human ingenuity: in seeking to master nature, humans have become a force on par with natural forces, but at the cost of endangering all life on the planet. Mastery of nature may entail prosperity in the short-term, but eventually it leads to the destruction of both natural and man-made worlds.

Fig. 2. The corrupted forest spirit heads towards Iron Town in search of his head.

At the same time that anthropogenic activity leads to disaster in *Princess Mononoke,* Miyazaki does not present humans as irrevocably corrupt or antagonistic to nature. Most notably, the film's deuteragonists—San and Ashitaka—stand as human characters who fight on behalf of the forest. This sympathy can be explained in part by the fact that San and Ashitaka do not belong purely to the world of humans—San due to her upbringing among wolves, Ashitaka because of the demonic curse afflicting him. However, even as they blur lines between humans and other species, both San and Ashitaka are persistently identified with humanity by other characters, including many forest denizens who view them with suspicion. For all that San tries to reject her human heritage, such ties to humanity are crucial to the film's final act in which only "human hands" can return the Forest Spirit's head and pacify his anger. Contrasted against Iron Town's adult population, San and Ashitaka's status as adolescents straddling childhood and adulthood casts them as symbols of change

and new ways of being. In their interactions with forest denizens, Miyazaki's heroes model an alternative mode of relating to nature, one which proves mutually beneficial for humans and non-humans.

At the same time that San and Ashitaka's behavior appears highly unusual to the inhabitants of Iron Town, Miyazaki does not necessarily position these characters as singular in their regard for the nonhuman world. Iron Town and the broader Japanese empire as represented by the unseen emperor may be societies in which anthropocentric logic reigns, but they are not the only models of community presented in the film. In particular, Ashitaka's Emishi village can be read as an alternative model for human/nature relations, with their treatment of Nago standing out as an example of respectful engagement with the nonhuman. Nago is introduced as a threat, and as a visually repulsive one who contaminates the ground he touches. Yet rather than reacting with disgust or fear, Ashitaka tries to reason with Nago, referring to him as a "mighty Lord" as he pleads with the god to let go of his anger. Even after Ashitaka's entreaties are unsuccessful and he is forced to shoot Nago, the Emishi continue to treat him with the reverence befitting a god. Approaching Nago, the village's wise woman first bows before reassuring him that the villagers will honor Nago's death by performing his funeral rites and marking the spot where he died with a raised mound (Fig. 3). In return, the wise woman asks that Nago "pass on in peace and bear us no hate."

Fig. 3. The Emishi village wise woman pays her respects to a fallen Nago.

Though Nago's anger remains unabated, what stands out here is the tenor of the interactions between him and the Emishi. In contrast to Lady Eboshi, who refers to Nago as a "brainless pig," Ashitaka and the wise woman address him with titles such as "mighty Lord" and "nameless god of rage and hate," respectful epithets which acknowledge the boar god's agency and power. Nago may not be human, but he is a person in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's sense of personhood as a category that is "anterior and logically superior to the concept of the human" (58). In his work with Amerindian peoples living in the Amazon rainforest, Viveiros de Castro develops the

concept of multinaturalism, which he sees as major characteristic of the worldviews of animist people. For Viveiros de Castro, while modern cosmologies are orientated around multiculturalism, or the belief that beings (primarily humans) inhabit the same nature but different cultures, animist cultures are multinatural ones in which beings (both human and not) inhabit the same culture but different bodies. Multinaturalism consequently operates according to "a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies," one in which culture is universal but manifests itself differently through different bodies (56). In the animist worldview, a jaguar is as much a person as a human[3]; indeed, from the standpoint of the jaguar, it is the person while humans exist as potential objects to be preyed upon. In this way, multinaturalism works against "the idea that culture is universal to human beings and distinguishes them from the rest of nature," instead emphasizing that other beings are persons even if their particular expressions of personhood may differ (12). Without erasing difference, multinatural personhood creates the grounds for interspecies respect and recognition. Nago may not be human, but he is nonetheless a person whose agency and capacity for retribution makes it all the more important that he is treated with respect. In contrast to Iron Town, where fear of animal gods leads Eboshi and the villagers to treat them as dangers to be eliminated, the Emishi present an animist alternative to anthropocentric thinking, one in which recognizing the potential danger of nonhumans such as Nago means recognizing their personhood and agency as well.

Trans-species Pidgins: Interspecies Communication, Semiosis, and Embodiment

Through presenting humans as not apart from nature but a part of it, the breakdown of the nature/culture division in *Princess Mononoke* calls into question many of the other binaries associated with it. One of these primary binaries that Miyazaki challenges is the split between speaking humans and mute nonhumans. Conventionally, language is viewed as the exclusive domain of humans: dogs and parrots may learn to associate words with certain outcomes, but such word-association is generally not considered language usage but rather learned Pavlovian responses. Instead, it is only humans who are fully communicating beings. If one defines language per Ferdinand de Saussure's classic formulation of signs as signifiers representing signified objects, it is difficult to argue that nonhumans possess language in the same way humans do. Language, as a vast cultural system that individuals must be inaugurated into, is constitutive of the human psyche in a manner that has not been found to be true of other species. As illustrated by Ludwig

---

[3] In Peter Skafish's translation of *Cannibal Metaphysics,* 'human' is used to designate both the species *homo sapiens* and the subject position claimed by humanity. Thus, Viveiros de Castro argues that nonhumans such as jaguars may "regard themselves as humans" while viewing "both 'human' humans and other nonhumans as animals" (12). For the purposes of clarity, I use 'human' to refer to *homo sapiens,* or what Viveiros de Castro designates "'human' humans," while 'person' is used to a category of subjectivity ("human persons") that can be occupied by multiple species.

Wittgenstein's dictum that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world," language plays a central role in shaping our psyches and how we view the world (72).

At the same time, language as symbolic sign-system is not the only form of communication available. Charles Peirce, who along with Saussure is often credited as one of the founders of the field of semiosis, divided signs into three categories: index, icon, and symbol. As originally defined by Peirce, icons resemble their referent (a painting of a river), indexes are traces of the physical presence of their subject (tracks left in the snow by a deer), and symbols bear no inherent relation to the referent—the word 'apple' is not innately linked to the intrinsic properties of an apple and thus can be replaced with the Spanish 'manzana' or the French 'pomme' with minimal difficulty. Whereas the icon and the index are closely tied to the material form of their signified objects (the index is the trace of the signifier's presence while the icon is modelled after the form of the signified), symbols are more abstract representations of their referents, arbitrary signs that create meanings through their linkage in vast chains of signifiers. Language, seen through the lens of the symbolic, enacts a severing from the material that parallels the rationalist attempt to separate mind from body and thought from world. With a definition of language as symbolic comes an additional severing between humans who possess language and are thus capable of complex thought and animals who, no matter how sophisticated their modes of communication may be, are limited to imprecise, non-symbolic modes of semiosis.

In reading *Princess Mononoke* as a text that challenges human exceptionalism, one of the film's most notable interventions comes in the form of its animal gods. Nago, Moro, and the tribes they lead are all capable of human speech, and with this capacity also comes human intelligence and agency: the animal gods strategize, philosophize about their role in a changing world, and debate the merits of different modes of resistance. At the same time, the forest gods' capacity for human speech does not mean a loss of their animal characteristics. Moro and her children use words to speak to humans, but they also communicate by growling and baring their teeth just as ordinary wolves do. The animality of the forest gods is not just behavioral but also sensorial, with smell playing an appropriately larger role in the sensorium of boar and wolf gods. Moro's children, for example, smell Ashitaka and his red elk[4] companion Yakul when encountering them afresh, a canine habit that acts as both a greeting and a way for gathering information (Fig. 4). Notably, the communication between the wolves and Yakul is a two-way exchange, and while Yakul as an ordinary animal may not speak, he is nevertheless portrayed as no less communicative. When Yakul willingly walks towards the wolf gods to exchange sniffs with them, the unexpected interspecies intimacy between wolf and elk indicates that there is a tacit

[4] Though characters in the film refer to Yakul as a "red elk," his exact species is ambiguous. Susan McHugh notes that while referring to Yakul as an elk seems to link him to "the extinct giant Irish elk, a species that (despite its name) once ranged as far as Japan)," Yakul is also "[d]rawn more to resemble a bongo" (9). Like the depiction of the Emishi village, which takes inspiration from historical records but also contains significant creative liberties, the "red elk" is best understood as a fictional synthesis of existent species mixed with invented elements.

understanding between animals that would ordinarily relate to each other as predator and prey. Here, animal materiality is not opposed to human abstraction, but a set of codes that operate parallel to and in conjunction with human modes of semiosis. If language is typically figured in terms of abstraction, a chain of self-referential signifiers which bear no innate relation to the objects they signify, cross-species communication in *Princess Mononoke* underscores that human language is not the only or even the most effective mode of communicating information. With all their mastery of symbolic language, the inhabitants of Iron Town do not understand the wolves and can only step away in fear. It is Yakul, via not language but more embodied forms of semiosis, who is able to successfully communicate across species barriers. Through such moments of interspecies communication, Miyazaki blurs the divisions between human and animal, presenting the two categories as overlapping realms rather than incommensurate ones.

Fig. 4. Yakul and one of Moro's wolf children experience a moment of interspecies intimacy.

At the same time that *Princess Mononoke* argues for the importance and sophistication of nonhuman communication, the film's portrayal of multiple forms of semiosis also destabilizes the assumed abstraction of symbolic language. As climate change has acted as a vengeful return of the represented, reminding rational Anthropos of our reliance on corporeal matter, the linguistic turn in theory has been followed by a more recent theoretical turn towards materiality. One key theorist in elucidating the embodied elements of language has been anthropologist Eduardo Kohn. In *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human,* Kohn focuses on nonhuman modes of communication in order to argue that semiosis—and in particular, cross-species semiosis—is constitutive of life itself. Through colors, scent, and taste, plants communicate their edibility to other animals, leading bees to pollinate certain flowers while bitterness and poison protect other plants from being eaten. Similarly, predator and prey animals learn to read signs of each other's presence in order to eat or avoid being eaten. For Kohn, human language may be more complicated and abstract than plumage displays or alarm calls, but it does not

constitute a fundamental break with nonhuman communication. This is because Kohn sees human selfhood as fundamentally "a product of semiosis" carried out within human and nonhuman realm, so that to speak of the mind is to necessarily speak of "minds-in-the-world" (34). Rather than existing independently of matter, minds are created by and embedded within the world, making them "waypoints in a semiotic process" that incorporates extends beyond the human (34).

From this conceptualization of minds as nested inside the world, Kohn argues that "the semiosis occurring "inside" the mind is not intrinsically different from that which occurs among minds" (34). Language systems may at present be uniquely human, but humanity is a category that exists within the world instead of transcending it. Consequently, though symbolic language may be more self-sufficient and abstract than indices or icons, it "is also ultimately dependent on the more fundamental material, energetic, and self-organizing processes from which it emerges" (56).[5] Without corporeality and thus corporeal forms of semiosis, abstract symbolic language does not exist. Within such a framework, symbolic language becomes not a sign of anthropocentric exceptionalism but rather one form of communication among several—more abstract than iconic or indexical semiosis, but still tied to them. In contrary to an opposition of (human) culture versus (nonhuman) nature—an opposition that is internalized by many characters in *Princess Mononoke* and which drives the film's central conflict—an embodied theory of semiosis presents forest gods, non-speaking animals, plants, and humans as all alike insofar as all are communicative beings. Rather than a culture/nature divide in which humans are set apart from and inherently destructive to nature, Miyazaki presents a vision of transspecies interconnection, one in which human destruction of nature can only end in self-destruction.

The Limits of Language: Plants, Alterity, and Meaningful Silences

Even as communication serves as a central node of interspecies commonality in *Princess Mononoke*, not all forms of semiosis are portrayed as equally visible or

---

[5] Another crucial part of Kohn's attempt to trace a counterintuitive link between symbolic language and materiality is his proposal of a hierarchal and unidirectional set of relationships that proceeds from icons to indices to symbols, with indices emerging as "products of a special layered relation among icons" and symbols as signs produced from relations among indices (52). In this chain of semiotic relationships, Kohn identifies icons as "the most basic kind of sign process" in which similarity serves as the basis for communication: the reflection of a bird in a pond communicates the presence of a bird above the pond (51). Having established icons as the basic unit of semiosis, Kohn then argues that the index is a sign whose comprehensibility is made possible by icons. In order for animal tracks in the snow to convey the previous presence of a bear or wolf, the tracks must conjure in the mind's eye a memory of the animal walking through snow—a memory that, by its nature, is also an iconic presentation of a prior time. Indices function through reference to icons, and in their turn, indices lay the groundwork for symbolic signs. Here, Kohn's example is the Quichua word chorongo, which refers to the woolly monkey that lives in South American rainforests. In teaching an outsider to associate chorongo with the woolly monkey, a Quichua speaker would point at the monkey while uttering chorongo, with the pointed finger acting as an indexical sign that links the word to the animal being pointed at. Though the complexity of language means that not all words are indexical, all language ultimately translates into icons insofar as Kohn sees icons as the basic unit of thought.

legible. Thus far, the discussion of nonhumans has focused primarily on animal life; plants, though present in Miyazaki's lush renditions of forest landscapes, are less central as characters. When analyzed from an animistic perspective, however, the silence of plant life emerges as a form of other-than-human personhood that is distinct from both human and animal personhood and which accordingly challenges both anthropocentrism and zoocentrism. As defined by Matthew Hall, anthropo- and zoo- centric classifications operate according to philosophies of exclusion, which organize different lifeforms within a hierarchy that justifies "the systematic devaluation of the lowliest parts of the hierarchy" (9). Plants, described by Aristotle as only possessing nutritive souls, exist to be used by animals, who possess both nutritive and a 'higher' sensitive soul; in their turn, animals exist to be used by humans, who rank highest on the Aristotelian chain-of-being because they possess nutritive, sensitive, and rational souls. By contrast, many forms of animism operate according to a philosophy of inclusion, which emphasizes "recognition of connectedness in the face of alterity" (11). Differences exist between plants, animals, and humans, but by foregrounding the ways in which "the plant, animal, and human realms interpenetrate," animism emphasizes connection and continuity across species (100). Humans are reliant on animals and plants for survival, and so they are obligated to consider such species kin—kin we may never fully understand, who do not communicate or act in the exact ways humans do, but important members nonetheless of an interspecies network that sustains all life.

Like its portrayal of animal persons, *Princess Mononoke's* portrayal of vegetal personhood includes both fantastical and non-fantastical plants. Vegetal spirits are present in the film—the Forest Spirit, for example, is associated with both plant and animal life within the forest, and the small, ghostly kodama spirits refer to specific trees as their mothers. With these spirits, magic grants them a greater range of movement and action than ordinary plants. For the most part, however, plants in *Princess Mononoke* behave as plants do: they do not move, talk, or appear to react to external events. Yet while the lives of ordinary plants may be obscure, *Princess Mononoke* uses fantasy to demonstrate that they do occur. In a conversation with Ashitaka, Moro laments that he, and by extension other humans, cannot hear the dying cries of the trees as they are cut down. As a species, wolves are well-known for outdoing humans in detecting smells and sounds; as a god and a wolf, it is thus unsurprising that Moro is attuned to the forest in ways that Ashitaka is not. Embodiment affects what forms of communication can be transmitted, tying the ability to process the world to specific kinds of bodies. As with Yakul, *Princess Mononoke* does not allow viewers to hear the trees directly, aligning us with Ashitaka and the other human characters. In doing so, Miyazaki challenges viewers to acknowledge that there are forms of semiosis and existence that we, because of our status as particular human creatures, may not be able to fully perceive.

Obscurity, however, does not mean such communication between beings is impossible. Plants may not speak, but as anyone who has attempted to keep a plant alive can attest, drooping stems or withering leaves act as clear indications that a plant

is not thriving in its environment. Correctly identifying the cause of ill health requires more work, but through attention to detail, it is possible to cultivate an attunement to vegetal communication. In a similar manner, Moro in *Princess Mononoke* can be seen as translating between trees and humans. Moro's summary of the tree's distress may not be a perfect or complete translation (though such inevitable imprecision is true of all translation), but what Moro does produce is what Kohn calls a trans-species pidgin, or a mode of communication that operates to "align the situated points of views of beings that inhabit different worlds" (141). Against a vision of incommensurable division between human and nonhuman others, trans-species pidgins are imperfect modes of communication that acknowledge the differences between worlds while also seeking to bridge them, allowing us to recognize the selfhood of other beings. In this way, trans-species pidgins work against what Kohn, following Stanley Cavell, refers to as soul blindness, which this paper will modify to call soul ignorance[6]: "an isolating state of monadic solipsism—an inability to see beyond oneself or one's kind" (117).[7] For Kohn, such ignorance is not just a question of ethical relations with nonhumans but also of survival itself. To regard a jaguar as devoid of agency and selfhood is to be unaware of the ways in which the jaguar may regard you—namely, as prey. Not all instances of soul ignorance end with such immediately dire consequences, but in smaller ways anthropocentric myopia contributes to a disregard for nonhuman life that ultimately harms humans as well. In countering anthropocentric exceptionalism, trans-species pidgins such as the one formed between Moro, Ashitaka, and the trees work to bring to light the ethical demands of other species as well as the interrelations between species that sustain human life.

Even with the possibility of trans-species translation, plants in *Princess Mononoke* continue to trouble the limits of knowledge and knowability. The work of external mediators gives viewers access to the voices of the dying trees, but these are not voices that are ever directly heard by humans. What is more, for every non-linguistic being who is given a voice in human language, there are many others whose intentions remain cloaked in silence—grasses, flowers, mosses, and stones whose voices are never heard either directly or indirectly. Yet human inability to perceive phenomenon does not mean that they do not exist, nor does it excuse us from ethical obligations towards unperceived others. As evidenced by Yakul or the kodama who guide Ashitaka safely through the forest, silence does not denote a lack of intelligence or agency. Instead, silence in *Princess Mononoke* functions as a sign of alterity, of modes of being that are radically Other to the human and whose forms of communication consequently elude human perception.

---

[6] Here, my choice of terminology is influenced by disability scholarship that has critiqued the linkage of blindness to ignorance.

[7] As originally defined by Cavell, soul blindness refers to a failure to recognize other human beings as selves, though Cavell does later contemplate the possibility of "a comparable blindness we may suffer with respect to nonhuman animals" in the essay "Companionable Thinking" (93). Kohn's usage of Cavell's term builds on this latter essay, explicitly expanding the categories of selfhood to include nonhuman selves alongside human ones.

Chief among these silent beings is the Forest Spirit, who notably never speaks throughout the film and whose motivations are obscure to even the other animal gods. Though the Forest Spirit's physical appearance largely evokes animal life—in the daytime, he appears as the antlered Deer God, while at night, he transforms into Night Walker, a towering, watery creature who walks on two legs—his powers over life and death also align him with plant life. When the Forest Spirit walks, flowers and plants bloom in his wake, tying him to the vegetal as well as the animal world (Figure 5). Similarly, after San and Ashitaka return his head, the Forest Spirit's last act is to make vegetation sprout over the ruins of Iron Town, transforming the devastated landscape into green space before the onlookers' eyes. Given the depth of the power he possesses, it is notable then that the Forest Spirit, in contrast to Moro and other animal gods, never speaks. While the other forest gods' supernatural powers edge them towards greater communicative clarity—they speak, grieve, and think in a manner and language similar to humans—the Forest Spirit remains largely inscrutable. Other characters give interpretations of his actions, but the Forest Spirit himself never offers any explanation of his motives or goals. As his diurnal form as the Deer God, his serene, mask-like gaze does not shift expression even after he is shot by Lady Eboshi; in his nocturnal form as the Night Walker, his form may be more humanoid, but his lack of a face and his looming stature make him appear more like a force of nature than a recognizable person with needs and wants.

Figure 5: Plants spring up when the Forest God's feet touch the ground, emphasizing his connection to vegetal as well as animal life.

As an indisputably powerful yet enigmatic force, the Forest Spirit represents a troubling unknowability that cannot be easily translated into understandable terms. Lady Eboshi's attempt to kill him thus acts as an attempt to translate his existence into human value: the Forest Spirit's head will grant the Emperor immortality, and in return for delivering the head, Eboshi and Iron Town will receive the Emperor's protection. According to an instrumental logic that views the nonhuman world as resource, Eboshi's decision to kill the Forest Spirit is an understandable calculation.

What this calculation misses, however, ends up destroying both Iron Town and the forest. In the same way, modern attempts to subordinate the natural world into standing reserve have resulted in the existential crisis of the Anthropocene. In reducing trees to lumber, instrumentalism overlooks their role in oxygenation, maintaining soil health, and other processes that make agriculture and other human activities possible. Further, even as modern studies of ecosystems reveal the many ways in which different lifeforms rely on each other, there remain—and will always remain—gaps in our knowledge of the ecological impact of nonhuman species. *Princess Mononoke* asks that we acknowledge these gaps and act accordingly, exercising caution and respect in our relations with non-humans.

By insisting on the necessity of respect for the unknown, Princess Mononoke shares affinities with what Michael Marder terms plant-thinking. As a form of thought that aims to reflect the vegetal lives and ontology, plant-thinking for Marder is a mode that emphasizes respect for alterity. Root systems, extending into soil and darkness, constitute the primary life of the plant, and yet this life is one which transpires outside the field of vision, largely unobserved but crucial to plant survival. Consequently, "to get in touch with the existence of plants one must acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible" (20). Philosophically, this means that plant-thinking is "a thinking that admits difference into its midst and operates by means of this very difference," acknowledging the Other without attempting to immediately assimilate alterity into understandable terms (164). As a form of thought that "preserves the unthinkable in its midst," plant-thinking encourages an attitude of epistemological humility: an understanding that elements of reality lie at the limits of knowability and one should proceed with respect for such unknowns. The Forest Spirit's actions may be difficult to parse, but that does not mean they are unimportant. At the end of film, it is the Forest God's magic that restores the landscape, prompting one man to wondering note, "I didn't know the Forest Spirit made the flowers grow." Prior to this moment, the townspeople's reaction to the forest has been primarily one of fear, with the various forest gods seen primarily "as adversaries whose actions bring only destruction and death, rather than growth and beauty" (Daniels-Lerberg and Lerberg 70). Plant-thinking foregrounds the possibility of such revisions to our understanding of the world, reminding us that human knowledge is never absolute and that there is still a world beyond the limits of language. Even as communication and the importance of forging cross-species dialogue are driving themes in *Princess Mononoke,* tendrils of plant-thinking entwine themselves within the film, insisting on a respect for the silence of those forces that cannot or will not speak.

Conclusion: Genre Fiction for the Anthropocene

In attempting to create stories that respond to the Anthropocene, contemporary writers have struggled against what Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* identifies as a literary tradition that identifies realism in

anthropocentric terms. In the nineteenth century, Ghosh argues, nature was assumed to be "moderate and orderly"; thus, in novels such as *Madame Bovary,* the behavior of the natural environment faded into the backdrop, becoming a background against which human affairs played out (22). It is humans, not trees or wolves, who have traditionally been the protagonists of 'real' literature—that is, literature that is worthy of critical claim and sustained academic study. As a celebrated figure in literary circles, it is perhaps unsurprising that even as Ghosh critiques nineteenth-century naturalism, he does not see speculative fiction as a fully viable alternative to realism. Science fiction and fantasy take place in "an imagined 'other' world apart from ours" instead of portraying climate change as "actually happening on this earth, at this time," and so speculative cli-fi novels lose the urgency that makes Anthropocene fiction "so urgently compelling" for Ghosh (27-73).

Against Ghosh, I argue for the ecological value of speculative visions, especially when it comes to countering anthropocentric bias. As a fantasy text, *Princess Mononoke* is not mimetic in the way that *Madame Bovary* is, but it is precisely this non-mimetic quality that allows it access to the worlds of animals, spirits, and plants. Miyazaki does not ask viewers to believe that wolves can speak or that trees make decisions in the same way humans do. However, through its fantastical visions of agential nonhumans, *Princess Mononoke* reminds viewers that our view of the world is always partial, with unperceived phenomena always occurring beyond the bounds of representation. In the cosmopolitics that fantasy presents, the natural world is not standing reserve, useful only so far as it can be put to human ends. Instead, boars and trees possess inherent value, and must be approached respectfully as agential beings whose lives intertwine with ours.

In asking viewers to expand their conception of what constitutes reality and personhood, it is notable that Miyazaki chooses to present his message through teenaged protagonists. Even as adolescence is constructed as a stepping-stone towards adult stability, it is time of malleability and potential change, and there is a long tradition tying the struggles of "the subversive adolescent" to "a critique of wider society" (Hilton and Nikolajeva 7). Old enough to have lost the child's naïve faith in adults but young enough to not yet be fully inured to societal norms, the teenage protagonist offers the possibility of new ways of existing and relating to others. When it comes to ecocritical visions, the historical linkage of animism and the child's mind further intensifies the radical potential of the adolescent activist. In classical anthropology, animism was taken to be the domain of the primitive and the childish— untutored children and savages believed in animism, not rational, educated adults. As the crisis of the Anthropocene continues to worsen, however, it has become clear that the world built by rational humans is in drastic need of revision. Amidst an ongoing climate crisis, the child's propensity for animism gains a utopic quality, with attunement to the non-human becoming an ability to "glimpse other worlds underlying and overwriting this one" (Halberstam 28). If animism has been historically associated with the child and primitive thinking, *Princess Mononoke* performs a recuperation of animistic worldviews through two adolescent

protagonists, one of whom explicitly belongs to a Japanese ethnic minority. Through San and Ashitaka, adolescents who guide the adults of Iron Town towards the possibility of a more ethical relation to the non-human, fantasy texts such as *Princess Mononoke* call for an attendance to older ways of thinking and relating which have been historically disavowed by disembodied rationalism. Wonder can be used to distract and mislead, but it can also allow us to see the world anew, temporarily divesting us of familiar worldviews so that we too can see the world "with eyes unclouded by hate."

Works Cited

Cavell, Stanley, et al. "Companionable Thinking." *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 91–126.

Daniels-Lerberg, Tracey, and Matthew Lerberg. "'To See with Eyes Unclouded by Hate': *Princess Mononoke* and the Quest for Environmental Balance." *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess,* edited by Rayna Denison, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018, pp. 57-73.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.* University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.

Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany.* State University of New York Press, 2011.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland, 1977, pp. 3–35.

Hilton, Mary, and Nikolajeva, Maria. "Introduction: Time of Turmoil." *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture,* edited by Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva, Routledge Publishing, 2012, pp. 1-16.

Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. University of California Press, 2013.

Millet, Lydia. "Climate Crisis Is Here; So Is Climate Fiction. Don't You Dare Call It a Genre." *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-07-07/climate-crisis-is-here-so-is-climate-fiction-dont-you-dare-call-it-a-genre. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia University Press, 2013.

Massey, Geraldine, and Clare Bradford. "Children As Ecocitizens: Ecocriticism and Environmental Texts." *Contemporary Children's Literature and Film: Engaging with Theory,* edited by Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford, Palgrave McMillan, 2011, pp. 109-126.

McHugh, Susan. "Being Out of Time: Animal Gods in Contemporary Extinction Fictions." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2010, pp. 1-16.

Miyazaki, Hayao, director. *Princess Mononoke.* Studio Ghibli, 1997.

Oziewicz, Marek. "Introduction: The Choice We Have in the Stories We Tell." *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz and Brian Attebery, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, pp. 1–12.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.* Routledge, New York, 1993.

Rusvia, Mónika. "Vegetal Magic: Agnieszka's Journey to the Understanding of the Vegetal Other in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*." *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, edited by Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guanio-Uluru, Routledge, 2022, pp. 88–97.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Translated by Peter Skafish, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The Edinburgh Press, 1922.