

Survival, Sustenance, and Self-Sufficiency: Taking a Plant-Based Perspective in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*

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Abstract

As evidenced by its title, *Into the Forest* (1996) by Jean Hegland traces the movement of two adolescent girls ever further into the forest in a postapocalyptic account of the near future. Set in fictional Redwood, California, it depicts a world where trees are gigantic and long-lasting while humans are diminutive and diminishing and contemporary human technological society has fallen apart. Plants, trees, and the forest, and an increasingly intimate knowledge and relationship with these, play a key and ever-growing role in the novel and illuminate its otherwise dark vision of the future. Ultimately, the sisters' taking of an increasingly plant-based perspective offers an alternative trajectory and path toward survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency for the two young women. Focused on young adult protagonists, the novel tells a post-apocalyptic tale that is both dark and inspiring in its vision of self-sufficiency and reintegration with nature, plant, and forest worlds and provides an ecofeminist critique of capitalist society as well as a more sustainable vision of a future adopted by its young protagonists. This article argues that an increasingly plant-based perspective figures centrally in the narrative arc of *Into the Forest* from beginning to end, from its title and setting to the trajectory of its unfolding plot, and in its conclusion and vision for the future.

Keywords: Postapocalyptic, ecofeminist, phytocentric, plant, forest, regeneration, redwood, burl.

Resumen

Como muestra su título, *En el corazón del bosque* (1996) de Jean Hegland traza el recorrido de dos chicas adolescentes adentrándose cada vez más en el bosque en un relato postapocalíptico de un futuro cercano. Ambientada en fictio Redwood, California, describe un mundo en el que los árboles son gigantes e imperecederos mientras que los humanos son diminutos y van disminuyendo y la sociedad tecnológica humana actual se ha derrumbado. Las plantas, los árboles y el bosque, y un conocimiento cada vez más íntimo de estos, juegan un papel esencial y cada vez más importante en la novela e iluminan su, de otra manera, visión oscura del futuro. Finalmente, el que las hermanas adopten una perspectiva cada vez más basada en las plantas ofrece una trayectoria alternativa y un camino hacia la supervivencia, el sustento, y la autosuficiencia para las dos jóvenes mujeres. Centrada en las dos jóvenes protagonistas, la novela relata una historia postapocalíptica que es tanto oscura como inspiradora en su visión de autosuficiencia y de reintegración con la naturaleza, el mundo de las plantas y los bosques, y proporciona una crítica ecofeminista de la sociedad capitalista, así como una visión más sostenible de un futuro adoptado por sus jóvenes protagonistas. Este artículo argumenta que una perspectiva cada vez más basada en lo vegetal ocupa una posición central en el arco narrativo de *En el*

corazón del bosque de principio a fin, desde el título y el marco de ambientación hasta la trayectoria de su argumento, y en su conclusión y visión para el futuro.

Palabras clave: Post-apocalíptico, ecofeminista, fitocéntrico, planta, bosque, regeneración, secuoya, nudo en la madera.

Redwood (Sequoia sempervirens). The coast redwood is the world's tallest tree and one of the most long-lived. In favorable parts of their range, coast redwoods can live more than two thousand years. Although only one seed in a million becomes a mature redwood, only wind and storm and man pose any threat to a full-grown tree. Even when redwoods are toppled or otherwise injured, they have a remarkable adaptation for survival. Wartlike growths of dormant buds called burls are stimulated to produce sprouts which grow from a fallen or damaged tree. It is common to see young trees formed from burls encircling an injured parent tree.

Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996), p. 168

Redwoods, A Prologue

As shown in the encyclopedia entry quoted above, which appears in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996), the California coast redwood, or sequoia sempervirens, is famous for being the tallest tree in the world, potentially reaching heights of over three hundred feet. It does not mention the redwood's once widespread global presence, its extensive logging, its mythologization, including in the service of colonial aims (Farmer), nor does it address the often dramatic experience of encountering them, about which even botanist Peter Del Tredici reflects, "something about their huge size or about the solemnity" one feels in their midst is almost spiritual, while "quasi-religious feelings are expressed by nearly everyone who visits an old-growth redwood forest" (Del Tredici 14). Indeed, redwoods often seem to shift the perspective of humans in their midst, as also shown in *Into the Forest*. The novel notes their remarkable survival adaptation—the redwood's power of basal regeneration. Its capacity to resprout and produce, from a burl or lignotuber, "physiologically juvenile shoots continually" throughout its long life, "endows the tree with a kind of ecological immortality," so that "as long as environmental conditions remain constant, the tree can live forever, or at least until it's uprooted" (Del Tredici 22). This botanical perspective on the remarkable resilience of the redwood seems a fitting place to start this article which takes a critical plant studies perspective on Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*, a young adult survival story set in the fictional town of Redwood, California that traces the evolving relationship of two adolescent sisters with the redwood forest near their home. As indicated by the directionality communicated by its title, *Into the Forest* (1996) traces the movement of its two protagonists ever further into the forest and toward plant and forest worlds, as well as their adoption of a plant-based or phytocentric perspective on plants, trees, and nature (cf. Guanio-Uluru 2023), as well as toward themselves and other living beings.

Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996)

A postapocalyptic account of the near future set in the forests near the fictional but significantly named town of Redwood, California, *Into the Forest* depicts a world where contemporary human technological society has fallen apart, leaving humans diminutive and diminishing, while the redwood trees seem gigantic and long-lasting. Plants, trees, and the forest, and an increasingly intimate knowledge and relationship with these, play a key and ever-growing role in the novel, as the protagonists learn to see the plant world around them and gradually reorient themselves toward plant-based perspectives rather than anthropocentric ones. I argue that the increasingly phytocentric perspective the sisters adopt during the course of the book helps to illuminate an otherwise dark vision of the future and thus converts a dark post-apocalyptic tale of devastation, societal collapse, violence, and trauma into an inspiring account of two adolescent women's survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency that ultimately provides an alternative and regenerating trajectory, where the sisters and a new generation might not just survive after trauma, but thrive as part of and within plant and forest worlds.

The novel *Into the Forest*, whose international impact is evidenced by the fact that it was translated into over a dozen languages (with the French translation being awarded a number of prizes), made into a film in Canada, and adapted as a graphic novel in French, focuses on young adult protagonists and the challenges they face on a journey toward adulthood. It therefore can be considered young adult literature, although it might be read by audiences of various ages. Like many contemporary works of young adult (YA) literature, it tells a post-apocalyptic tale that is both dark and inspiring in its vision of adolescent and ecofeminist self-sufficiency and therefore can be read productively in this context (Basu et al.; Curry; Jorgenson; Curtis). As characteristic of YA literature, *Into the Forest* also includes an implied critique of society and, in line with other dystopian and postapocalyptic YA literature, includes an alternative and more sustainable vision of the future represented by adolescent characters, who in fact rebel against conventions of various kinds. This article, however, will focus particularly on how *Into the Forest* merits attention from a critical plant studies perspective due to how this tale of two adolescent sisters offers a reorientation toward a phytocentric perspective that reintegrates the human with nature, forest, and plants and ultimately offers a model of regeneration after trauma. It will examine how plants, trees, and forest develop from being threatening, unknown, and not understood to becoming a refuge and safeguard, providing sustenance and healing, serving as shelter and ultimately an abode, and ultimately representing a site of regeneration and a birthplace of the future, like the redwood burl with which this article begins. As I will show, phytocentric perspectives figure increasingly prominently and centrally in the book's symbolic systems from beginning to end, from its title and setting to the key surroundings of its unfolding plot, and in its concluding vision for the future.

Critical Plant Studies in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Critical plant studies is by now an established field, including in children's literature research, where it has been surveyed, for example, by Lydia Kokkola in 2017, treated extensively in an edited volume on *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* by Lykke Guanio-Uluru and Melanie Duckworth in 2021, which focuses on the representation of plants in literature for children and young adults, and theorized more recently by Lykke Guanio-Uluru in 2023. Such work builds on earlier ecocritical analysis of children's and young adult (YA) literature from an ecocritical perspective, such as Dobrin & Kidd in 2004 and Nina Goga et al. in 2018, and earlier studies from a plant studies perspective (Jaques; Kokkola; Goga, "I begynnelsen var treet", "Økokritiske perspektiv"; Guanio-Uluru, "Plant-human hybridity", "Imagining climate change"). Notably for this study, Zoe Jaques devotes a chapter in her 2015 study of *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (2015) to the "Tree," while Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guano-Uluriu's edited volume *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* includes an entire section and 4 articles to "Arboreal Embraces" (Duckworth; Desczc-Tryhubczak and Van Bergen; Goga "I felt like a tree lost in a storm"; Casals Hill; Mayne-Nicholls). The current article is indebted to these works.

For example, Zoe Jaques points to the "posthuman potential" of trees insofar as they "point to ways that the environment is of superior importance to the individual life of man, while also, as a source of heat and shelter, sustaining that very life" (115), as experienced by the protagonists of *Into the Forest*. Her analysis, however, focuses on texts that are "tales of (male) heroism and survival" with "hero-protagonists that "rely heavily upon plants, trees, and wooden tools to achieve their aims" (117), while this article focuses on female protagonists in a text that answers her call "to shift the focus onto female protagonists" (117). Kokkola writes that to read children's literature "through a critical plant studies lens, we would need to reject the idea that humans are guardians of the earth and highlight the dependence of humans on the plants. The resulting behaviours might be similar, but the power relations are decidedly different" (Kokkola 277). Precisely such a shift in power relations and dependence is staged over the course of *Into the Forest*, where humans increasingly learn to depend on plants, while their survival clearly depends on it. Kokkola also relates plant studies to ecopedagogy, citing Greta Gaard's suggestion that

children's literature has an important role to play in developing ecopedagogy [which] differs from traditional environmental education which champions 'sustainable development'. Instead, ecopedagogy places the unsustainability of endless growth and demands a radical reconsideration of human-nature politics. Understanding that plants – not humans – hold the balance of power over the future of the earth, as critical plant studies promotes, is a key step in this endeavour. (Kokkola 278-279)

The ultimate humility of the sisters at the end of the book and their willingness to forsake and burn everything in their former home and move "into the forest," in this sense can be seen to cede anthropocentric power and offer a supreme reorientation

toward a phytocentric perspective. The novel's adolescent sisters accept and embrace the fact that, as Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note, "plants dominate every terrestrial environment, composing ninety-nine percent of the biomass on Earth' (Mancuso & Viola xii)," which helps to "instill some humility into anthropocentric planetary thinking" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 1). As a tale of two sisters, *Into the Forest* also taps into feminist posthumanism (Haraway; Braidotti), which offers "persistent critiques of the modern capitalist exploitation of both the environment and other species by calling for a revision of the anthropocentric world view characteristic of current Western culture" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 2). Indeed, *Into the Forest* opens with a critique of the commercialism of Christmas by the girls' father already on the second page of the novel (2) and of capitalism and "voracious consumers" by the seventeen year-old protagonist Nell by the fourth page of the novel (4), which sets the stage for the conceptual transformation to come that includes a rejection of consumerism.

Indigenous Traditions and Models

Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note that Indigenous and pagan systems of thought "have long retained more respectful alliances with the plant kingdom than has Western science" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 2). *Into the Forest* offers a rejection of Western science, petrochemicals, and technology. Tellingly, Jean Hegland foregrounds as inspirational intertexts three published sources focused on local Indigenous knowledge and experiences, including *Sinkyone Notes* (Nomland), *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories, and Songs* (Margolin), and *Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island* (Heizer and Elasser). These lift forward stories of independent survival in a similar natural setting by specific historical figures, including two Indigenous women whose stories are specifically cited in Hegland's Acknowledgments and quoted in the text itself, namely "the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island" (147-148) and Sally Bell. Both represent inspiring stories of survival by an Indigenous girl or woman. The Lone Woman survived 18 years alone on San Nicolas Island as a young woman before dying soon after being taken to the mainland in Santa Barbara. Sally Bell shares her own childhood survival account in *The Way We Lived* (Margolin), where she recounts that she was a "big girl" when her family was massacred by some "white men" and witnessed how they killed her "baby sister," an infant who was still crawling, and "cut her heart out and threw it in the brush where I ran and hid" (166). She "hid there a long time with my little sister's heart in my hands," noting "I felt so bad and I was so scared that I just couldn't do anything else" (166). She then "ran into the woods and hid there for a long time," living "on berries and roots" and sleeping "under logs and in hollow trees" before her brother found her and took her to live with "some white folks" (166). The conclusion of her story and the fact that "white men" are the perpetrators, but "white folks" also represent the only refuge to be found after the massacre, raises important issues elided by Jean Hegland. Indeed, it is important to note the markedly different

experiences of Western civilization by these historical Indigenous women and the fictional white characters in the story.

Yet, aspects of these two Indigenous women's stories of trauma, survival in nature, and resilience over time, as well as their experiences of brutality, violence, and loneliness due to loss of kin, find reflection in *Into the Forest* both implicitly and explicitly. Indeed, Hegland's novel itself echoes Sally Bell's flight "into the woods," as well as in its overall tone toward Western civilization and the rapacious brutality of "white men" from whom the sisters flee into the forest, living on plants and finding shelter in hollow trees. Their story of survival and resourcefulness in nature also echoes the story of the Lone Woman, but reverses its trajectory from independent survival in nature to a toxic and fatal final encounter with Western civilization, by instead tracing a trajectory from toxic civilization toward independent survival in nature, which makes it more akin to white, Western romanticizing of Native life. In both cases, importantly, the tragic aspect at the conclusion of these historical Indigenous women's stories gets elided and erased, while the romanticized survival story is appropriated without regard to the differences in white and Native experiences or history versus fiction.

Nonetheless, these Indigenous foremothers, as it were, are recalled repeatedly in the novel as touchstone figures by the protagonist Nell, just as they are cited by Jean Hegland in the book's Acknowledgments. Yet, at the same time, this use of these Indigenous women's stories represents yet another Western appropriation of Indigenous traditions, stories, and lands and conveniently glosses over the fact that the whiteness of the author and fictional protagonists resembles that of the historical perpetrators of this violence. Indeed, the problematic aspects of appropriation are forecast by the fact that the sisters' pretend play in childhood includes pretending that "we're Indians" (51). By the same token, there is at first little mention in the book of surviving Native people or those who lived in these lands previously. At one point "American Indians" are listed among long ago civilizations (148) in a way that erases contemporary groups. But the book later does also cite massacres, such as the one survived by Sally Bell, as the reason for diminished numbers. Yet this absence and erasure also allows Indigenous knowledge and "Native" plants to instead benefit the sisters. Indeed, as children, they unselfconsciously claim ownership of the land. But at a later point, in response to her erstwhile boyfriend Eli's remark that "It's your forest," Nell recalls, "I was about to protest that it was not my forest when I remembered the redwood stump Eva and I had once claimed as our own" (117). At the same time, however, the author scrupulously cites her Indigenous sources in the Acknowledgments, so the influence and appropriation of Indigenous traditions in the book is not silent, hidden, and uncredited, at least, just as the paratext also notes that Hegland is donating proceeds toward reforestation efforts.¹

¹ Among the publication front matter Jean Hegland also notes that "The author is donating a portion of her royalties from *Into the Forest* to World Stewardship Institute (Santa Rosa, CA) for reforestation efforts," which also seems pertinent to this article's focus on plants and trees.

Interestingly, Jean Hegland's novel arguably cleaves closely to a pattern in Native American novels that critic William Bevis in his influential article "Native American Novels: Homing In" (1987) calls a "homing plot." In contrast to a typical Western plot where an often male protagonist leaves home to go on a journey, as Bevis writes, "In Native American novels, coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call 'regressing' to a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary model of knowledge and a primary good" (582). As part of the homing plot, the protagonist abandons an individual search for the self and instead finds it in "a society, a past, and a place" (585). The ecofeminist *Into the Forest*, which was clearly inspired by several Indigenous accounts and stories, in fact may be seen also to adopt, or even appropriate, a kind of homing plot typical of Native American novels. Unlike the Western male hero in a typical journey plot, here it is female protagonists who come home, stay put, contract, and regress to the forest of their childhood, where they cease to seek their selves elsewhere and find themselves in the past and in a place. The young adult's coming of age and maturation into an adult thus represents a kind of homing in as part of a local geography.

Overcoming "Plant Blindness"

From a critical plant studies perspective, a persistent "lack of interest in discussing plants as a form of life" in Western philosophy, as Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note (3), and a deeply rooted zoocentrism has been manifest in what Wandersee and Schussler labeled "plant blindness", later defined by Wandersee and Clary "as the inability to see or recognize the plants in one's environment, frequently combined with an inability to recognize the unique biological features of plants and to appreciate their importance in the biosphere and in human affairs" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 3). This notion of plant blindness is powerfully demonstrated in the example of the female protagonists of *Into the Forest*. Indeed, the novel, which simulates an episodic journal being written in the present, can be understood as an account of the sisters' gradual overcoming of plant blindness and eventual taking of a phytocentric perspective even toward the human and themselves. In so doing, the sisters go further than merely viewing trees as being in service to humans, as noted by Kokkola and Jacques (2015), or as merely instrumental (Guanio-Uluru, "Analysing Plant Representation"). Indeed, they eventually adopt a more phytocentric perspective (Guanio-Uluru, "Analysing Plant Representation"), even toward how they view themselves, each other, and a newborn infant by the end of the book, and adopt a different power relation and humility with respect to the natural world.

The sisters' movement toward overcoming plant blindness proceeds in a series of gradual steps. First the collapse of civilization cuts them off from electricity and then the power of gas to transport them or generate electricity, thereby removing petrochemicals and technology from their lives. Their world rapidly shrinks, as they come to think of a separation from "the world beyond Redwood" (16) and eventually

become “so isolated from even Redwood that it was sometimes hard to remember anything unusual was happening in the world beyond our forest. Our isolation felt like a protection” (18). Under their resourceful father’s guidance, they reorient from being consumers and leaving home to staying home and (re)using the resources they have. Their father, who is a positive figure until his untimely accidental death, reminds his daughters of the resources they do have, like “a well-stocked pantry, a garden and orchard, fresh water, a forest full of firewood, and a house” (18). Such a view of the forest as a mere source of firewood in some sense ultimately leads to his death in an accident involving a chainsaw (90-94), so in this sense his diligent cutting of wood to provide for his daughters ultimately leaves them as “orphans, alone in the forest” (94), although with plentiful stores he has built up for them as a legacy. His death thus also represents the death of earlier ways, as if opening up space for younger saplings to grow in new directions.

An Adolescent Return to Childhood Places and Homing In

Although the forest at first seems like an enemy that deprives them of their father, the girls have older childhood memories of happily playing in the forest, though this is contrary to the wishes and fears of their mother (50-51). The novel’s relating of their initial entry into the forest as young children is accompanied by a description of the forest where they live, which begins, significantly, with a possessive:

Ours is a mixed forest, predominantly fir and second-growth redwood but with a smattering of oak and madrone and maple. Father said that before it was logged our land had been covered with redwoods a thousand years old, but all that remained of that mythic place were a few fallen trunks the length and girth of beached whales and several charred stumps the size of small sheds (51)

As children, the girls had found and claimed such a stump and “made it our own” and would play “pretend” there in a variety of ways that actually forecast the future more than they knew (51). In this childhood period of playing intensively in the woods, their mother called them “wood nymphs,” which links them with the trees (52). In a retrospective view near the beginning of the book, Nell remembers their childhood play and recalls how, “Back then, it seemed the forest had everything we needed” (52), which is a childhood view to which the sisters ultimately return by the end of the book, as young adults, although with a less possessive or instrumental view, as they instead cede control and ownership over things and plants and take up residence by living harmoniously among them.

Eventually, however, the young girls had grown up and found other activities that motivated them. After Eva had turned toward other things, Nell recalls, “I tried going up to the stump alone, but my time there always seemed to drag [...] and finally the forest came to mean nothing more than the interminable distance between home and town” (52). As they grew up, both sisters forgot the childhood significance of the forest to them, showing how they actually acquired greater plant blindness in

adolescence than they had had as children. Nell later returns to the childhood stump as an adolescent, spontaneously bringing her visiting boyfriend Eli there. Rather than finding this childhood play site diminished by the passage of time and her own growth and maturation, she notes “I had forgotten how massive it was, how solid” (119). She quickly reenters into a childhood consciousness of the stump’s living nature and the biomes it supported, noting how “it seemed alive. Its outer walls were covered with miniature forests of mosses and lichens. On the north side there was an opening wide enough to let two children enter hand in hand” (119). Returning to the stump thus offers a kind of return to this childhood perspective and a sense of smallness, humility, and sensitivity to plants and other life forms, and literally allows for entry into the tree itself, as human encounters with redwoods famously do.

When Nell and Eli kiss at the stump, the narrator observes from a distinctly and newly phytocentric perspective, “We could have grown roots, we stood there so long” (119). Subsequently, they make love, marking a significant transition or rite of passage into maturity for Nell. Afterwards they find “sharp oak leaves sticking to our backs and elbows and knees, redwood fronds love-knotted in our hair,” while Nell “opened her eyes, looked up through the stump to the sky beyond the braid of branches, and it seemed I could hear the sap rising through the ghostly wood” (120-121). The return to the stump thus accomplishes a profound transformation in perspective, as if gaining a new sense of hearing and sight—newly opened eyes and a view framed by the tree. This moment marks a significant turning point in the book toward phytocentric perspectives, which are facilitated by this redwood tree stump in young adulthood, as in childhood before.

Despite their budding relationship, Nell ultimately rejects Eli’s invitation to join him in traveling across the country in pursuit of a rumored renewal of civilization in Boston, which is where her former dreams of academic self-realization had resided. Although she at first does depart with him and begins to make the journey, she changes her mind and instead opts to stay with her sister, cleaving closely to home and to her kinship with her sister, who is the only family she has left. She thereby chooses a homing in plot. When her sister asks, “Why did you come back?” she answers, “Because you’re my sister, stupid” (141). This divergence from a male-initiated journey, risks, adventure, and a heteronormative romantic relationship leading into the future toward a female-focused desire to remain at home and the valuing above all of a sororal relationship and kinship ties with roots in the past also proves pivotal in the book. Nell thus chooses not to be uprooted, but instead stays close to her roots.

Pivotal Moments and Turning Points

Following this pivotal decision for Nell, Eva faces a crisis point in her own life, being violently raped by a man outside their home. She is deeply traumatized, while her life is forever altered. From this point forward, the sisters live in fear of another intruder and are profoundly aware of their vulnerability. Seemingly inescapably, the

sisters feel “surrounded by violence, by anger and danger, as surely as we are surrounded by forest. The forest killed our father, and from that forest will come the man—or men—who will kill us” (146). At this point, the sisters turn away from men, who represent violence to them, and feel forsaken by the forest. They instead find in each other the love and support they need. Even when Eva turns out to be pregnant as a result of the rape, she welcomes the pregnancy and baby regardless of the circumstances of its conception, feeling with conviction that the baby is “its own person” (165), thereby choosing life and growth while ceding control to nature, as the sisters increasingly do. They altogether reject past models and shed social conventions governing relations, even between human beings and family members.

As part of their healing and reorientation toward plant life, the sisters turn to gardening, another form of growth when facing diminishing stores of food. They also discover that they can forage for berries in the woods, despite their mother’s long ago prohibition. Nell suddenly realizes “surely there is more than just an afternoon’s treat of berries in the woods. Surely the forest is filled with things to eat. The Indians who lived here survived without orchards or gardens, ate nothing but what these woods had to offer” (171). In this way, Nell suddenly recognizes her own plant blindness and ignorance and cites the Indigenous past as evidence of this. She recognizes that, despite all her studies, she knows only poison oak and a fir tree from a redwood, no more. She vividly describes this realization:

all the other names—Latin or Indian or common—are lost to me. I can’t even begin to guess which plants are edible or how else they might be used. [...] And how can bushes or flowers or weeds feed us, clothe us, cure us? How can I have spent my whole life here and know so little? (172)

Having recognized her plant blindness, Nell declares, “There has to be a way we can learn about wild plants” (172), and eventually finds her mother’s book *Native Plants of Northern California*. At first it proves a disappointment:

unconsciously I had been expecting a friend, a guide, a grandmother—some wise woman who loved us and who knew how much we had suffered, who would rise from the pages of that book and lead me into the woods, kneeling by the stream to show me herbs, poking her stick into the bank to dig up roots, patiently teaching me where to find, when to harvest, and how to prepare the forest’s bounty. (173)

This search for an elder wise woman also recalls Indigenous traditions, being linked repeatedly with plant knowledge, as does Nell’s subsequent comparison to reviving a lost language: “I feel as if I’m trying to learn a new language without the help of tapes and books, a language for which there are no longer any native speakers, and for the first time in my life, I wonder if I can pass the test” (173). This remembrance of Indigenous people acknowledges this Indigenous past and tragic losses, but also, in another way, perpetuates “vanishing Indian” narratives that neglect Native American

persistence and have worked strategically in the past to allow for the reappropriation of Indigenous land and traditions.²

Eventually Nell succeeds in overcoming plant blindness and begins to “untangle the forest, to attach names to the plants that fill it” (174). For example, she suddenly sees that “All these years, the bushes that line the roadside have been hazelnut bushes” (174), while the “flowers we laid on our father’s grave were blue-eyed grass—the root of which is supposed to reduce fever and ease an upset stomach” (175). Nell thus discovers in the forest spices, medicines, moss for diapers, and other things her pregnant sister may need. She also discovers teas that had been hidden from her by her plant blindness, as if discovering an entire new alphabet of plants:

There are teas. For months now we have drunk hot water when we could have been drinking wild mint, wild rose, blackberry, bay, mountain grape, black mustard, pennyroyal, manzanita, fennel seed, sheep sorrel, nettle, fir needle, madrone bark, yerba buena, black sage, pineapple weed, violet, wild raspberry. (175)

Most importantly for their continued sustenance, Nell discovers acorns, “a staple part of the diet of many peoples” with high nutritional value, and observes, “I’ve lived in an oak forest my whole life, and it never once occurred to me that I might eat an acorn” (175). Overcoming plant blindness thus proves to be the key not just for their survival, but also offers a way for them to thrive in a new life at home in the forest.

New Phytocentric Perspectives

These epiphanic realizations mark a complete reorientation to an increasingly phytocentric perspective. Tellingly Nell observes,

Before, I was Nell and the forest was trees and flowers and bushes. Now, the forest is *toyon, manzanita, wax myrtle, big leafed maple, California buckeye, bay, gooseberry, flowering currant, rhododendron, wild ginger, wood rose, red thistle*, and I am just a human, another creature in its midst. Gradually the forest I walk through is becoming mine, not because I own it, but because I’m coming to know it. I see it differently now. (175-176)

If previously, Nell had begun to hear the forest, now she has begun to more truly see it. She also increasingly recognizes the past histories of the forest and reads in her encyclopedia about the Indian tribes referred to as the Pomo who inhabited the region, seeing the Indigenous history to which she also had been blind. It is then that she encounters the story of Sally Bell, which the book quotes almost in full (178-179), removing only the final mention of Sally being found by her brother and being taken to live with “white folks,” which effectively leaves Sally Bell alone in the forest. Like the Pomo, who divided the year into thirteen moons named for the food that was

² For example, Sara Schwebel addresses the “vanishing Indian” trope in the chapter “Indians Mythic and Human” in her book *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), while Carole Goldberg counters this aspect of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in “A Counterstory of Native American Persistence” in Sara Schwebel’s edited volume *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Readers Edition* (University of California Press, 2016).

available when the moon was full, Nell now notes only the moon and food they are harvesting, but has forgotten what month it is (179). Similarly her name has disappeared among all the plant names, as she becomes just a human listed as an afterthought to a description of the forest and many plants, thus restoring phytocentric power relations.

Nell's subsequent killing of a boar in order to combat anemia in her pregnant sister also causes changes in Nell. She in some way merges with the wild sow she has killed out of necessity, for the sake of her sister and her baby, and consumed. As if having merged with the boar, she sometimes feels "as though I were bearing her feral old soul along with my own" and finds herself "looking around these rooms with a sort of sideways terror" and has to remind herself "*Those are only walls. They can't hurt you,*" while her first thought when she wakes is "panic—I've got to get outside" (207). She thus has adopted more of a wild animal's perspective on her human home. By contrast, while napping outdoors at the stump, she sleeps very well. In this place, in her dream, her human self vividly merges with the vegetal and is fused with the natural world and all the environment:

I dream I am buried in the earth up to my neck, my arms and legs like taproots tapering to a web of finer roots until at last there is not clear demarcation between those root hairs and the soil itself. As I look out over the earth, my skull expands as though I were absorbing the above-ground world and the sky itself through my eye sockets. My head grows until it is a shell encompassing the whole of the earth. I wake softly, with a sense of infinite calm (206).

Indeed, frequently in her dreams, the distinction between human and animal is challenged, such as through dreams about symbolic encounters with a bear, until one night when she seemingly has a peaceful encounter with a bear, as the dream becomes reality. These experiences demonstrate a dissolution or even undoing of the human self enabled by a new phytocentric perspective and profound transformations that have resulted and produced new relations between all living things.

Conclusion

The stories of the Lone Woman and Sally Bell, as inspiring foremothers, as it were, are also recalled near the end of the book. In a pivotal moment for the sisters, which threatens the survival of Eva and her infant, since she is struggling to give birth at home, these two Indigenous women are cited as models of using instincts to survive and thereby outliving horror and trauma (212). Guided by instinct, Nell leads Eva to the stump, and once the sisters manage to reach it, all prospects improve. Nell observes, "tonight it seems there is nothing in these woods that would want to harm us. Instead, I think I feel a new benevolence abroad, as if the forest had finally grown sympathetic, as if—huddled inside the stump—we finally mattered" (215-216). This formulation shows a non-anthropocentric view, where in fact the sisters are dependent on the forest and trees and recognize this, while the forest becomes benevolent toward them. When Eva gives birth in the stump,

the sounds she makes are beyond the pain and work of labor, beyond human—or even animal—life. They are the sounds that move the earth, the sounds that give voice to the deep, violent fissures in the bark of the redwoods. They are the sounds of splitting cells, of bonding atoms, the sounds of the waxing moon and the forming stars (216)

At this point Eva's life is no longer differentiated from the tree, plants, forest, and nature, but has become one with it. As if the first woman, Eva's primal birthing cries speak for the earth, trees, and all, so that she now gives voice to her environment and is one with it. At the same time, however, this representation of women's bodies as 'natural' in an elemental or cosmic sense might also be critiqued from a feminist or ecofeminist perspective.

The newborn infant's entry into their life plays an important role in the conclusion of the novel. Although Eva names the boy Robert after their deceased father, Nell prefers to call him "Burl." As noted in the prologue to this article, the novel cites an encyclopedia entry about the coastal redwood that also focuses on the burl as a remarkable adaptation, also evocatively observing beforehand that the final sentences of Nell's reading mingles with her dreams (168). Nell's use of a botanical term for a part of a redwood tree to apply to a human infant, indicates how her frame of reference has changed to a phytocentric one. At the same time the symbolism of the burl here is significant and powerful. Since the infant called Burl was born of violent rape and an injury upon her sister, and is being raised by two sisters who have been through deprivation, loss, trauma, and hardship and found new ways to navigate the world, the name also signifies a kind of regeneration. A family devastated by loss has reconstituted itself in an unconventional arrangement, as if "encircling an injured parent tree" (168). The burl is also considered "a remarkable adaptation for survival" (168) and therefore completes a triad of survivors.

Although the forest initially had been described as a second-growth redwood forest that had been logged, with a few fallen trunks and charred stumps as the remains of a mythic place covered with redwoods a thousand years old (51), the ghostly redwood tree stump has been rejuvenated and effectively regrown into a still living and significant thing influencing events. Similarly, "those other sisters of mine, the Lone Woman and Sally Bell" continue to be present as guides in moments of hardship or loneliness, in a formulation that now conjures them as a living presence and even kin alongside the sisters, reaffirming their place rather than erasing them. As Nell writes, "each of us longing for the kin we have lost, each of us learning to inhabit the forest alone" (228). At the book's conclusion the sisters not only decide to move to dwell in the stump in the forest for good, but even burn their home and former life, both so there is no return and also to eliminate the threat of human invaders. By this point in the novel, they now have such confidence in the sustaining capacity of the forest that Eva declares, "If we really need something, we'll get it from the forest" (236). She responds to Nell's uncharacteristic hesitation and doubt with the assertion, "We'll learn. We need an adventure" (235). When Nell notes that this is precisely what Eli had said in inviting her to depart, Eva responds with a critique, "This is a real adventure. His was only an escape" (236), signaling how this is an

ecofeminist sort of a homing plot, rather than a Western male hero's journey away, and thus offers a unique plant studies take on the young adult novel as well.

To finally persuade the hesitant Nell, Eva takes another tack, "Think of Burl," she urged, using Nell's name for the baby for the first time. 'Even if you can't do it for yourself, do it for him'" (237). Mentioning the child by this phytocentric name finally persuades Nell to embrace this new regenerative vision. They then leave "a whole house full of things we once thought we needed to survive" (239) and use a redwood branch to burn their former life and enter the woods forever. At this point the former dancer Eva finally dances again, but with a new phytocentric model, "She danced with a body that had sown seeds, gathered acorns, given birth [...] now wild, now tender, now lumbering, now leaping. Over the rough earth she danced to the music of our burning house" (240), in another primal scene. This makes for an odd display of power, and fire, even as they cede power to plants for good.

The novel's final lines—"Now the wind rises and the baby wakes. Soon we three will cross the clearing and enter the forest for good" (241)—offer a conclusion to the book and the trajectory it has traced toward a phytocentric perspective in *Into the Forest*. Since the novel concludes here, even as the journal-simulating narrative ends, this movement into the redwood forest for good, for the sake of Burl, leaves the reader behind, as the story's young adult protagonists and their newborn infant slip away among the trees of the forest toward a new life. Since the trajectory of the book has increasingly merged their reality and perspectives with that of the forest, this completes a kind of transformation and even dissolution of the human into the world of plants. At the same time, young readers may be comforted by the fact that, due to the sisters overcoming plant blindness and embracing a phytocentric perspective, they have found new models for survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency to guide them into adulthood. This new epistemology derives from an intimate knowledge of plants, as well as their own resilience and regenerative capacity, exemplified by the redwood tree and its burl, which holds the secret of eternal youth and ecological immortality.

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