

Seeds of Change: Negotiating Hierarchies in Seed Picturebook Stories

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Abstract

How tiny seeds are represented in children's literature has long eluded critical attention, although they are frequently foregrounded in the words and images of children's picturebooks. Drawing upon critical plant studies, new materialism, and Kathryn Parsley's notion of "plant awareness disparity", this article analyzes three contemporary seed picturebook stories, namely Jory John and Pete Oswald's *The Bad Seed* (2017), Cristiana Valentini and Philip Giordano's *Stay, Little Seed* (2020), and Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler's *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011). With a focus on the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic relationship with children, the analysis of the three seed stories reveals the empowering nature of seed narratives which represent seeds as anthropomorphized characters or symbolic motifs, but most essentially, as agentic beings with vibrancy. These stories exhibit the poetic entanglement of seeds and children in an agentic assemblage of collective vulnerability, which not only blurs the line between the human and vegetal, but also negotiates power hierarchies embedded in the world ruled by adults. Thus, I argue that seed stories reveal the agentic power of seeds by crafting various forms of poetic entanglements between seeds and children. Although the child-seed entanglement may not entirely deconstruct an asymmetry between adults and innocent children as well as between matured plants and tiny seeds, this study offers an alternative perspective that counters the perception of seeds and children as vulnerable and controlled.

Keywords: Seed stories, critical plant studies, new materialism, agency, plant awareness disparity.

Resumen

La crítica ha eludido durante mucho tiempo cómo aparecen representadas las semillas diminutas en la literatura infantil, aunque suelen ocupar un primer plano en las palabras e imágenes de los libros infantiles ilustrados. Recurriendo a los estudios críticos sobre plantas, al nuevo materialismo y a la noción de "disparidad en el conocimiento sobre plantas", este artículo analiza tres historias ilustradas sobre semillas, concretamente *La mala pipa* (2017) de Jory John y Pete Oswald, *Stay, Little Seed* (2020) de Cristiana Valentini y Philip Giordano, y *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011) de Jen Cullerton Johnson y Sonia Lynn Sadler. Centrándose en la representación verbal y visual de las semillas y de su relación poética con los niños, el análisis de las tres historias sobre semillas revela la naturaleza empoderadora de las narrativas sobre semillas que representan a las semillas como personajes antropomorfos o como motivos simbólicos, pero, más esencialmente, como seres con agencia y vitalidad. Estas historias muestran la implicación entre semillas y niños en un ensamblaje de vulnerabilidad colectiva, que no sólo desdibuja la línea entre lo humano y lo vegetal, sino que también negocia las jerarquías de poder que subyacen en el mundo gobernado por los adultos. De esta forma, sostengo que las historias de semillas revelan la poderosa agencia de las semillas al crear diversas formas de implicación poética entre semillas y niños. Aunque esta implicación puede que no deconstruya completamente una asimetría entre adultos y niños inocentes, así como entre plantas maduras y semillas diminutas, este estudio ofrece una perspectiva alternativa que se opone a la percepción de las semillas y los niños como vulnerables y bajo control.

Palabras clave: Historias de semillas, estudios críticos de plantas, nuevo materialismo, agencia, disparidad en el conocimiento sobre plantas.

Introduction

In his book *The Triumph of Seeds* (2015), Thor Hanson highlights the pervasive presence of seeds in various aspects of our lives: “From our morning coffee and bagel to the cotton in our clothes and the cup of cocoa we might drink before bed, seeds surround us all day long” (loc. 16). The recognition of seeds as the basis of human diets, economics, and lifestyles reveals the dominance of seeds on our planet. However, due to their small size or underground status, seeds often remain on the periphery of our consciousness in ways that are regularly unacknowledged and undervalued. Such a perspective limits our perception of seeds as merely sources or commodities and overlooks the agential role that seeds play in the process of creating our existence with the natural world, resulting in what Hanson laments: “We hardly recognize how utterly dependent we are upon them” (loc. 12).

In contrast to this, children’s literature, particularly picturebooks with both verbal and visual narrations, provides a venue to explore, engage, and foreground the representation of seeds. For instance, in Dr. Seuss’s ecology fable *The Lorax* (1971), an entire Edenic and pristine environment is devastated, leaving only the last *Truffula* seed tossed to a boy. The last remaining seed that the boy tries to catch not only represents a serious reminder of humans’ reliance on the natural world, but also symbolizes a glimmer of hope and the final opportunity for regeneration under the regime of industrial modernity. Likewise, Eric Carle emphasizes the significance of seeds in his informational narrative, *The Tiny Seed* (1970). This story depicts an undersized sunflower seed’s perilous adventure to a suitable spot for winter rest, spring germination, summer growth, and autumn dispersal. The portrayal of the tiny seed as a folk hero embarking on an Odyssean voyage underscores its agency and capacity to act independently and influence human beings. Furthermore, Ruth Krauss and Crockett Johnson’s classic *The Carrot Seed* (1945) vividly captures the power and vitality of seeds. In this story, a boy dismisses all doubters and diligently cares for his seed, resulting in the emergence of a giant carrot larger than a wheelbarrow, “just as the little boy had known it would” (23).¹ In all these seed stories, seeds are thematically associated with the anticipation, ability, and power of growth, forging literal or figurative connections with children.

The convergence of the seeds, the growth motif, as well as the seed-child analogy, thus gives rise to the following research questions: With the thematic continuum, how are seeds rhetorically represented in contemporary seed picturebook stories? In seed narratives where the growth motif is pervasive, what are

¹ Although usually there are no page numbers printed on picturebooks, for the convenience of indication, I numbered pages of the selected picturebooks from the start of verbal narrations to the end of them (excluding the title page, half-title page, and endpapers).

the relationships constructed between children and seeds? In what ways do these representations reinforce or deconstruct the established power norms surrounding seeds, plants, children, and adults? This study aims to address these questions by exploring the agentic power of represented seeds and their poetic entanglement with children in seed stories. This perspective aligns with the goal of critical plant studies, which seeks to reverse the centrality of humans (Kokkola 274), and draws on the insights of new materialism, which embraces the ethics of relationality among all creatures, including seeds, children, and the wider material world. (Iovino and Oppermann). In the context of critical plant studies, “seed stories” are understood as types of “plant narratives” (Griffiths) or “stories featuring plant narrators” (James). These narratives encapsulate stories we tell about botanical life as well as stories the seeds or plants tell us. In a new materialist sense, the “agentic power” is interpreted through Jane Bennett’s concept of “thing-power”, which recognizes all things, even imperceptible seeds, as agentic beings with vitality, capable of producing their own meaning and effects. Following a critical review that accounts for the ways in which seeds are overlooked as well as scholarly discussions on the poetic entanglement of seeds and children in terms of growth and agency, this study conducts a close reading of Jory John and Pete Oswald’s *The Bad Seed* (2017), Cristiana Valentini and Philip Giordano’s *Stay, Little Seed* (2020), and Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler’s *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011). These stories not only reflect various dimensions of seed-child entanglements in terms of growth, but also indicate various forms of inherent hierarchies within relationships involving seeds and plants, children and adults, as well as nonhumans and humans.

From Plant Blindness to Seed Representation

One possible explanation for the neglect of seeds in children’s literature studies can be encapsulated in the term “plant blindness”. Coined by James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler, this term describes modern humanity’s tendency to overlook and undervalue plants, which leads to (a) “the inability to recognize their importance in the biosphere, and in human affairs”; (b) “the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms”; and (c) “the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals” (“Preventing” 82). Terri Doughty expands on the concept of “plant blindness” by highlighting its implications for the recognition of human-plant interconnections. Additionally, the notion of “plant kinship blindness” is introduced, elucidating the lack of recognition of the genetic kinship between animals (including humans) and plants (Bouteau et al.).

Scholars engaged in critical plant studies within Euro-centric cultures often start their discourse by referring to the phenomena of “plant blindness” or “plant kinship blindness” to problematize our anthropocentric view of plants and our hierarchical relationship with plants. However, the notion of “plant blindness” itself is subject to debate. Situated in disability studies, Kathryn Parsley suggests that the term “plant blindness” utilizes a disability metaphor that “equates a disability

(blindness) with a negative or undesirable trait” (599). As an alternative, she proposes a new term “plant awareness disparity” to replace the original one that is associated with ableism. The shift in terminology clarifies that it is the *disparity* of our attention, attitude, knowledge, and relative interest between animals and plants that causes the *inability* to notice plants rather than a *disability*. Nevertheless, regarding the root of “plant blindness,” which is that people with anthropocentric thinking rank plants as inferior to animals (“Toward a Theory” 3), the new term delimits the notion of “disparity” to the humans’ differential attention towards animals and plants, without explicitly acknowledging the disparities among various plant species and their life cycles or forms. It is worth noting that Wandersee and Schussler originally defined “plant blindness” with specific reference to “flowering plants”, stating that “the term is most appropriately used in reference to [this particular category]” (“Toward a Theory” 3). However, it seems that their followers have overlooked this taxonomic distinction, treating the entire plant kingdom as a single perceptual category and disregarding the differences among plant species. Furthermore, within the existing scholarship in literary studies of plants, there is a tendency to focus primarily on the representations of fully grown plants with distinct biological features, while neglecting plants in other life stages, particularly the foundational stage of seeds.

In Randy Laist’s *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), the first book of the seminal anthology *Critical Plant Studies: Philosophy, Religion, and Culture*, many chapters employ the word “plants” loosely, while only a few delve into the dynamic life forms of plants. On the other hand, *Plants in Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2021), the first comprehensive compilation of plant representation in the field of children’s literature, conquers the plant awareness disparity of different plant species. This collection encompasses a wide range of plants, including ferns, mulberry trees, gooseberry bushes, and chamomiles (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 12), thereby broadening the scope of plant awareness. Nevertheless, many essays in this volume primarily focus on mature plant forms presented in the texts, often overlooking the essential life cycles that each mature plant undergoes. Despite this, scholars of plant studies and children’s literature (such as Li and Ryan; Duckworth and Herb) have alluded to the metaphor of seeds by titling their works with seed imagery.

The limited attention given to the topic of seeds in children’s literature research can be considered a manifestation of “plant awareness disparity” when extending Parsley’s concept to encompass not only the failure to recognize plants and our interconnections with them but also the failure to acknowledge the disparities among different plant species and their various life forms. Accordingly, this study focuses on seed stories in an attempt to address the conspicuous lack of critical examination devoted to the representation of seeds in children’s literature, a genre featuring the growth motif and various forms of agency.

Seeds, Growth, and Agency

Etymologically, the English verb “to grow” with its Middle Dutch origin *groeyen* or *groyen*, meaning “to manifest vigorous life; to put forth foliage, flourish”, has a denotation of plant growth (Trites 2). We understand what growth literally means as we witness the transformation of a plant from a seed to a mature plant in parallel to a person’s physical, emotional, and cognitive development from childhood to adulthood. In Roberta Trites’ metaphorical explanation, it is the mapping of “the spatial relationship of upwards growth onto the concept of maturation” (19). Seed stories then may involve recognizable narrative patterns of the *Bildungsroman* (“coming-of-age”), “the novel of transition from youth to adulthood” (Trites 4). However, Michael Marder finds the conceptualization of vegetal growth as a purely quantitative increase in extension “utterly reductive” (“The Sense” 89). Concerning the germination process of a seed, he explains:

To grow is to extend oneself in different directions; to appear better, more fully; to keep giving something new to sight and to all the other senses; to become ampler, yet also to develop in concert with the environment ... When a seed does germinate, it grows both up and down, sending roots and shoots, as it orients itself in lived space. (“The Sense” 89)

The differences between Trites’ description of growth based on mature plants and Marder’s illumination of growth based on seeds lie in the different philosophical interpretations of plants and seeds. For Aristotle, a fully developed plant is *energeia*, a complete activity or actual being, whereas a seed is *dynamis*, a potentiality for such activity (Fosshem 47). Although a seed holds the *potential* for growth, the outcome of its development is not guaranteed. If a seed grows, whether it grows as a healthy plant, a barren plant, a tap-rooted plant, a creeping plant, or any other form of plant is indeterminate. Its germination commences in the middle, within an “in-between” position containing multiple possibilities, as Michael Marder notes that a “seed yields the multiplicity it shelters even in the singular form” (*Plant-Thinking* 89). The possibilities of a tap-rooted and fascicular form of growth recall the tree-like and “rhizomatic” images of thoughts presented by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The former suggests a hierarchical structure, whereas the latter indicates an open and anti-hierarchical relation (Deleuze and Guattari 5-7).

Likewise, the growth of a child can also present a variety of states in children’s literature. On the one hand, children are expected to grow in a tree-like form, following the norms of maturity defined by adults who typically have more socio-economic and political power (*Power* 8). On the other hand, children’s books celebrate those who grow in a “rhizomatic” form against the norms and authority. The tension between different forms of growth is also embodied in the *Bildungsroman*, whose protagonist can only achieve his or her interior or spiritual growth after undergoing “painful soul-searching” and “accommodation to the modern world” (Buckley 18).

However, seeds are not just entangled with interior growth, but also with soil, water, sunlight, animals, and nature as a whole. Tracking the dispersion of seeds, Henry Thoreau builds a plant-animal mutualism argument to illuminate “the ancient and uneasy relationship” among seeds, plants, birds, rodents, insects, and all other agents in the forest (xvi). This kind of relationship aligns with Donna Haraway’s “webs of kinship”, in which “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time)” (103). The observation of the shared nature of all species resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s non-hierarchical “rhizomatic” interconnection (23), which also inspires new materialists’ construction of a “flat ontology” that resists hierarchies between life and lifeless matter and assumes a “perfect equality of actants” (Bennett 104). Seen through a new materialist framework, agency, or the capacity to act as an agent, is not exclusively a human attribute, but a property possessed by any material inherently (or “vibrant matter” in Bennett’s term). Further, Karen Barad recognizes that agency emerges through relationships among individual materials (33). Human individuals and societies are thus embedded parts of a larger material process of exchange and energy flow. In this light, she proposes to replace “inter-actions” (a term implying engagement with each separate entity) with “intra-actions” (a term implying human actions as always already inside a larger flow), as “intra-actions recognize distinct agencies emerge through their intra-activity” (33). The change of perspective brings about the rewriting of the “default grammar of agency” that assigns activity to humans and passivity to nonhumans and constructs the “agentic assemblage” in which agency is confederate, distributed across the whole ecosystem (Bennett 199-21).

Just as manifold forces shape the growth of a seed, many factors shape the growth of a child, such as parenting, education, and cultural beliefs, to achieve the transition from childhood to adulthood. This constructivist view of growth tends to objectify young children as human becomings on their way to achieving full biological and cognitive maturity, independence, and agency already possessed by adults (Haynes and Murriss). This stance itself is problematic “since [it] stipulates adulthood as a norm and childhood as an abnormal state to be left behind” (“Recent trends” 136). Alternatively, the new materialist approach re-orientates our focus towards jointly agentic and ever-transformative encounters between children and adults within texts. Building on Barad’s “intra-action”, Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss propose the idea of “intra-generation” that reconfigures a non-hierarchical and mutual relationality between children and adults. The establishment of “intra-generation” blurs the age boundaries and results in children’s and adults’ being and becoming part of the world’s mattering. Regarding this, all humans and non-humans are entangled, intra-acting with each other in an assemblage.

Therefore, seeds within the assemblage of seed stories are “vibrant matter”, possessing agency, value, and meaning, no matter whether they are represented as symbolic motifs or anthropomorphic characters. Children, who share similar trajectories of growth with seeds, are also participants in the assemblage, having incomparable intra-actions with the world. Given that children typically experience

oppression and powerlessness in a world ruled by adults (*Power 8*) and seeds represent plant life at its most minuscule, they become intertwined in a collective assemblage of vulnerability. By recognizing the intrinsic power of seeds and/or children and highlighting the confederate agency that emerged from the seed-child entanglement, the analysis of each seed story in the following sections seeks to negotiate with the existing power hierarchies in the adult world. To illuminate the representation of seeds and the relational poetics of seed-child interactions, I have chosen three recently published picturebooks that explore different angles of seed-child entanglements in terms of growth.² *The Bad Seed* concerns the personal dimension of a seed-child entanglement, in which an anthropomorphized seed recounts his experience of being bad. *Stay, Little Seed* draws on the motif of mother trees, revealing the seed-child entanglement in an intergenerational relation. *Seeds of Change* depicts the social-interactive growth of a child, building metaphorical interconnections between seeds and children.

Self-expressions and Self-identity in *The Bad Seed*

Through the new materialist lens, one of the realizations of agency of all matter is to address its innate capacity for self-expression. In Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's words, "if matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is 'telling'" (79). This interpretation of agentic matter is based on matter's "narrative" power itself. Matter, in this regard, is not just a "vibrant matter" as Bennett proposes, but a "storied matter" or "a site of narrativity" (Iovino and Oppermann 83). For a plant, its "narrative" or "telling" is conceptualized as "plant narrative" (Griffiths). Tree rings are examples of plant narratives (James). A seed, with a full set of DNAs of a plant, is also an example of plant narrative. Regarding seeds as archives, Luci Attala and Louise Steel explain that the DNA of seeds can provide information on their area of origin as well as complex interconnections with plants, people, and climate (43). In this light, seeds become storied seeds or texts themselves. Seed stories, then, become a medium to inscribe and represent storied seeds with nonhuman agentic power. To better reveal their agency in children's stories, Guanio-Uluru suggests representing the vegetal forms "as an amalgam of phytomorphic (plant-like) and anthropomorphic (human-like) characters" (157). *The Bad Seed* is an example in which the seed character blends both botanical and human traits.

The title of the book *The Bad Seed* involves a wordplay. It not only plays with the phrase "a bad seed"—a person of bad influence, but also refers to the anthropomorphized seed character who has a bad manner, a bad temper, and a bad attitude. It opens with the title character's self-confession that "I'm a bad seed. / A baaaaaaaaaaaad seed" (1) and ends with the bad seed's decision to be happy by doing

² The depiction of seeds in children's picturebooks tends to be a cross-cultural concern. *Stay, Little Seed* was originally published in Italy, while *The Bad Seed* and *Seeds of Change* were published in the United States. Additionally, *Seeds of Change* presents the story of a Kenyan environmental activist.

good. Born a good seed with a “humble” manner “on a simple sunflower, / in an unremarkable field” (11), the title character used to conform to the image of a natural and innocent child. What changes him may be the loss of his family and his near-death experience caused by industrialization and commercialization which destroys his home and turns him into packaged food. The sunflower seed recalls:

But then the petals dropped.
And our flower drooped.
It's kind of a blur.
I remember a bag...
Everything went dark...
...and then...*then*
...a giant! (13-20)

The recollection of the seed character uncovers storied seeds' intrinsic capacity for storing information as archives, which is captured in both verbal and visual narrations. To show the bad seed's “thing-power”, the author gives the seed figure voice, granting his subjectivity of producing “plant narratives”. By revealing that “the very idea of narrative is not limited to human storyteller” (James 267), the talking seed also challenges our exclusive ownership of linguistic competency and questions human/nonhuman boundaries divided by narrative autonomy. While anthropomorphism serves as the narrative device allowing the bad seed to express himself, the use of short sentences followed by long pauses (indicated by ellipses) captures one of the significant aspects of plant communication: slowness³ (Wohlleben). Positioning the seed character as the narrator of the seed story, the verbal narration is phytocentric, depicting his natural origin as well as interconnections with other seeds and humans.

However, in contrast to the phytocentric verbal narration, the visual narration appears to mix both human-oriented and plant-oriented views. All characters in this seed community with different kinds of seeds are represented as an amalgam of anthropomorphic features and phyto-realistic details.⁴ On the one hand, these seed figures take on humanoid forms, with characteristics like arms, legs, and faces modeled on the human body. On the other hand, the seeds' bodies resemble the represented species with recognizable phyto-features in terms of their size, shape, line, color, and texture. For example, the sunflower seed character with drop-shaped black-and-white striped shells. Further, the illustrator changes the “size of frame” of the illustrations by presenting the bad seed in “close up”, “mid shot”, or “long shot” to adjust the social distance between the seed character on paper and the child reader in front of the paper (Kress and van Leeuwen 124-9). For instance, at the beginning of the flashback in which the seed narrator tells the reader that “I was born a humble seed, on a simple sunflower, / in an unremarkable field” (11), the reader can only view a sunflower field in a distant “long shot” without identifying the seed narrator.

³ Another famous example of anthropomorphized plants that talk slowly (and even move slowly) is the Ent, a tree-giant character in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

⁴ For further discussions on phytomorphic and anthropomorphic plant characters in children's picturebooks, see Lykke Guanio-Uluru's “The Phyto-Analysis Map”.

Following the depiction of a phyto-realistic sunflower field, the illustrator zooms in for a close-up representation of the anthropomorphized bad seed having fun with his big family (12). Changing from the long-shot to close-up representation, the illustrator not only introduces vegetal knowledge about the origin of sunflower seeds to the young reader, but also creates a means to engender a sense of intimacy and empathy for the seed narrator. As the distance between the seed character and the reader gets closer and closer, the reader is invited to engage in the view of the seed character—in other words to see the world from the seed’s perspective. For example, we recognize the seed character in a close-up representation lying in the package bag sadly, fearfully, and hopelessly (18), while we also immerse in the seed’s perspective explaining that “everything went dark...” (17). From the human-oriented perspective, the life history of the seed is about our interactions with seeds in terms of farming, gathering, producing, and consuming food. From the plant-oriented perspective, it is about the seed’s recollection of the traumatic experience of losing his family as well as capacity for growing into a sunflower and transmitting his stored information. By permitting a closer view of seeds, these illustrations build “intra-actions” between the character and the reader, helping to dispel our “blindness” towards seeds by providing visual access to “becoming” seeds.

The process of searching for self-identity is also integrated into the self-expressions of the seed, which aligns with a child’s self-understanding journey in a *Bildungsroman*. In the bad seed’s autobiographical description, he makes a list of his badness in every sentence starting with “I”, such as, “I never put things back where they belong” (7), “I’m late to everything” (7), and “I never wash my hands” (8). The use of the pronoun “I” positions the child reader along with the seed character. In effect, the child might, like the bad seed, have sought for his/her identity. The reconstruction of the bad seed’s self-identity occurs when he looks at himself in a broken mirror (27). Facing the mirror, the anthropomorphized seed may realize who he really is—part nature, part product, and most essentially *himself*. The “nature” partly motivates him to be good, while the “product” partly urges him to be bad. The tension here resembles the “painful soul-searching” (Buckley 18) in a *Bildungsroman*. The seed and the child co-experience the restless process of being “good” to accommodate the rest of the world. They are enmeshed literally and spiritually, co-sensing a “sort of mix[ed]” feeling beyond the dualism of the world (30).

A Seed Child of a Mother Tree in *Stay, Little Seed*

The seed protagonist in *The Bad Seed* belongs to a “big family” of seeds, with siblings growing alongside a sunflower in the field (11-12). Concerning the system of “assemblage” in new materialism, it is possible to disclose not only the kinship crossing human and nonhuman species as Bouteau et al.’s “plant kinship blindness” and Haraway’s “webs of kinship” allude to, but also the kinship for plants. In fact, the phrase “kin recognition” appears regularly in plant studies, referring to “the ability of plants to distinguish their relatives from the strangers” (Attala and Steel 17). Taking

mother trees as examples, Peter Wohlleben explains that these more established trees can recognize and talk with their kin, shaping and caring for their future generations. However, Wohlleben provides evidence that mother trees overshadow their offspring with enormous crowns to prevent their children from growing quickly (32). They do not approve of the rapid growth of their offspring, not because they do not want the independence of their children, but because they want their offspring to live a long life. Wohlleben interprets that “slow growth when the tree is young is a prerequisite if a tree is to live to a ripe old age” (33). A similar situation emerges in the plot of *Stay, Little Seed*.

Stay, Little Seed depicts intergenerational interactions between an anthropomorphized tree as a protective parent and a seed as a growing-up child. When it is time for seed dispersal, all seed children leave their mother tree, except for one tiny seed who clings to its branch in the tree. Although the mother tree knows that in order to make her seed grow independently, “[the seed] needed / to let go of [her] branch, / and fly off to Who Knows Where” (6), she allows the seed to stay for “just one more day” (7) as she is not only worried about the seed’s safety but finds herself lonely on the hill. The inner conflict of letting go and staying here increasingly deepens as the mother-like tree finds more excuses and the phrase “just one more day” (7, 9, 13) quickly multiplies. Over time, the tree’s attitude towards the seed’s stay shifts from mere permission to gentle persuasion. Instead of encouraging the seed to leave, she asks repetitive rhetorical questions to confirm that her seed child will stay with her—“You can’t go out in the sun without a hat, can you?” (10); “You can’t leave without some clothes when it is so windy and cold, can you?” (12); “You can’t go anywhere without boots, can you?” (14). The tree character’s impulse to care for the tiny seed resonates with real mother trees’ actions to provide nutrients to their offspring. The care provided by the tree in the book, however, is exaggerated in the illustrations of the tiny trappings, such as an umbrella, rain boots, a cap, a scarf, and many more. The physical clothing prepared by parents for their children in literary works not only symbolizes parental love and protection but also parental fear and constraints. This tension is also demonstrated by the contradictory use of black and red lines against the yellow-cream-colored background, in which the given trappings are highlighted in red, while profiles of the characters are drawn in black lines. It is evident that the adult-like tree is the active provider while the child-like seed is the passive recipient. The fact that the mother tree is looking downwards at the seed (or a sapling at the end of the story) indicates the former’s power and authority throughout the story. Although the seed child holds mobility, a symbol of freedom, the seed child is physically and psychologically constrained by familial ties and is always connected to his mother tree.

Extending the botanical findings on mother trees’ “kin recognition”, this seed story involves “the material imagination of their human counterparts” (Iovino and Oppermann 82). In other words, on the one hand, mother trees as storied matter co-constitute the meaning of discouraging the rapid growth of their offspring together with the human author and illustrator; on the other hand, this seed story activates the

materiality of mother trees and their offspring in the forest through words and images (which are also storied matter themselves). This is an instantiation of entanglement of humans' narrative power and plants' narrative power, in which, as Jane Bennett puts it: "human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, non-human agencies" (108). However, whether the mother tree is recognized as a material property or as a literary representation, the power hierarchy between the tree and her seed is inevitable. Although both the mother tree and the seed child are agentic participants in an assemblage, their interdependencies seem unequal, whereby the child seed apparently relies more on his mother tree's protection and the mother tree has greater power to decide her child's leave or stay. In *Stay, Little Seed*, such unequal interdependencies are also embodied in its "home-away-home" pattern (Coat 71), where the seed child leaves his mother tree for an adventure and eventually returns to the mother tree's side. Thus, despite the new materialists' ideal of constructing a "flat ontology", the existence of plant kinships, such as the relationality of a mother tree and her offspring, strengthens the socially constructed adult/child hierarchy to some degree.

Spreading Ecological Values Through Webs of Kinship in *Seeds of Change*

Although *Stay, Little Seed* reveals the plant kinship that binds a mother tree and a child seed, it also reminds us of our kinship with plants. This form of interspecies kinship goes beyond our genetic ties to plants (Bouteau et al.) and is rooted in our day-to-day engagement with them. In order to cultivate such kinship, Haraway proposes that we embrace both responsibility (being responsible for the interactions with the more-than-human) and "response-ability" (being responsive to the more-than-human) (114). *The Bad Seed* and *Stay, Little Seed* evoke a sense of responsibility and "response-ability" through the portrayal of anthropomorphized seeds. Differently, *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* engages with the two notions by employing metaphorical seeds. While *The Bad Seed* and *Stay, Little Seed* depict the seed-child entanglement on a personal and an interpersonal level respectively, *Seeds of Change* expands this entanglement to encompass a broader social dimension.

Drawn on the autobiographic writing of Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, *Seeds Of Change* is a biography with an overview of the first African female environmentalist's life from her childhood interconnection with nature and cross-national education experiences, to her struggle against deforestation and success in initiating the Green Belt Movement and spreading ecological values to the world. Although seeds are not focalized characters in this story, they merge with Wangari's body and life as vibrant matter of offspring of *mugumo* trees (wild fig trees in Kenya) as well as being symbols of growth, knowledge, and ecological values. Born as a native of Kenya, Wangari's upbringing fosters her ecological awareness to build connections (or make kin) with nature: " 'Feel,' her mother whispered. / Wangari spread her small hands over the tree's

trunk. She smoothed her fingers over the rough bark” (4). The physical touch breaks spatial boundaries between Wangari’s body and the vibrant tree, awakening the child protagonist’s perceptions and sensual appreciation of the more-than-human world. “Wangari wrapped her arms around the trunk as if hugging her great-grandmother’s spirit. She promised never to cut down the tree” (5). From touching to hugging, spatial boundaries between the two species tend to dissolve. The physical intimacy evokes an affective bonding, which further gives rise to the construction of kinship promoted by Haraway. Wangari embraces both responsibility and “response-ability” (Haraway 114). On the one hand, she realizes that she is accountable for protecting the tree. On the other hand, she gives physical and emotional responses to the tree.

The images of Wangari’s entanglement with nature further enhance the manifestation of kinship. Concerning the use of colors and lines, the illustrator applies white contoured lines to both the natural landscapes of green leaf patterns and the characters’ clothing featuring colorful floral patterns. These contoured lines are interwoven lines along which materials flow and mix, intergrading humans with nonhumans. No matter where Wangari is, she always wears outfits that blend lines and colors *of* nature, *from* nature, and *with* nature. She is constructing an assemblage that aligns with animals, plants, and the natural world by becoming part of them—she “ate the delicious fruit, just as geckos and elephants did” (4) and “listened as still as a tree, but her mind swirled with curiosity like the currents in the stream” (8). The consumption of plants helps the dispersal of fruit seeds; the perception of nature involves the vibrancy of matter. The unitary lines in images and similes employed in words draw the world of materials, forms, and mass together. Wangari, *mugumo* fruits, geckos, elephants, trees, streams, and many more participants become incorporated through building “intra-actions” (Barad) within the cosmos as a whole, in which, as Iovino and Oppermann describe, “dynamics of ‘diffuse’ agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced” (80). In other words, the system of “intra-actions” rejects the hierarchy in favor of the human community, acknowledging cross-species alliance and every matter’s agency. This is a rhizomatic paradigm that enacts Wangari’s reciprocal relationships and her “agentic assemblage” with nature (Bennett). The establishment of the anti-hierarchical relationship between Wangari and nature relies on an egalitarian intergenerational relation as well as an ecocentric cultural belief.

Compared with Once-ler’s claim that the tree is quite useful and can produce a “Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need” (24), Wangari’s mother reminds her daughter that “[the tree] is home to many. It feeds many too” (4). “ ‘Our people, the Kikuyu of Kenya’ ”, Wangari’s mother continues, “ ‘believe that our ancestors rest in the tree’s shade’ ” (5). Wangari’s mother explains the ancient wisdom of co-evolution and shared ancestry. Compared with the evident strong didactic tone in *The Lorax*, it appears that Wangari’s mother is not just teaching eco-didactic knowledge, but instilling a kind of *belief* in actions and emotions. Literally, this is just a belief in native plants, but it implies an inclusive and humble view toward all matter. Wangari, her mother, plants, and “all earthlings” are kin, forging an assemblage in which every

entity shares “a common ‘flesh’ laterally, semiotically, and genealogically” (Haraway 103). Within the assemblage, the adult and the child involve in an “intra-generational” relation that challenges the adult/child power hierarchy in a conventional intergenerational relation (Haynes and Murriss). This means that the system of assemblage can be a means of empowering children as they are positioned alongside vibrant matter, such as seeds.

The entanglement of Wangari and seeds permeates through her development from childhood to adulthood. When Wangari finishes elementary school, the metaphor of seeds appears for the first time in the text: “Her mind was like a seed rooted in rich soil, ready to grow” (12). In this botanical simile, the seed stands for the child’s innocent mind, ready to be cultivated in Eden with wisdom. Before Wangari left her birthplace for the first time, her mother “picked up a handful of earth and placed it gently into her daughter’s hand” (12). In this sense, Wangari herself is a seed that carries the ecological belief of her ethnic group and the hope of her family. She is physically disconnected from the natural landscape after relocating to an urban setting, but she is still mentally entangled with nature. The contradiction between the real urban life and the ideal homeland is vividly illustrated in a double spread, in which there is a plant tendril stretching over the page layout, reminding Wangari of the “Kikuyu tradition of respecting all living things” (15-16). Her poetic relationality with nature established since her childhood gives rise to her enthusiasm and commitment to biology studies. Education gradually changes her life during her transition from a seed, a sapling, to a tree. She becomes a scientist and environmentalist, confronting the environmental devastation caused by authoritative powers. Wangari with “an idea as small as a seed but as tall as a tree that reaches for the sky” (33), travels to “villages, towns, and cities with saplings and seeds, shovels and hoes” (38). She launches the Green Belt Movement, responsive to deforestation that attempts to wipe out the elemental kinship. However, while she fights for plant rights, she is arrested. In her jail cell, Wangari is “like a sturdy tree against a mighty wind” (43). In some way, Wangari and plants are mutually dependent. Plants need her to speak for them; Wangari needs plants to entail her will and empower her agency. The entanglement with plants keeps Wangari powerful. After getting out of prison, she travels around the world again to share her story about seeds, trees, land, and her intra-actions with all matter. Fortunately, “in time Kenya changed. More people listened to Wangari’s message, calling her the *Mama Miti*, ‘Mother of Trees.’” (46). In the illustration (45-46), the figure of Wangari is phyto-morphized. She is the main trunk of a tree, carrying a handful of seeds. These seeds sprout actively, extending and reaching out to the world around them. Here, seeds represent the ecological belief in Wangari’s mind, spreading through webs of kinship to humans who have not yet engaged.

Conclusion

We have long co-created with seeds in ways that are routinely unacknowledged and underrecognized. In children's literature studies of plants, for instance, there is a pronounced absence of scholarly attention to the representation of seeds, despite a preoccupation with seeds in many children's picturebooks. In this essay, I have expanded Parsley's notion of "plant awareness disparity" by capturing the disparities of our attention to different plant types and their life stages. This extension fosters a more inclusive and holistic perspective on the significance of seeds in our environment. Seeds are foregrounded in seed stories for children, particularly picturebooks featuring the growth motif and seed-child analogy. With a focus on the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic entanglement with children, this study takes a new materialist approach to examine three contemporary seed picturebook stories, namely *The Bad Seed*, *Stay*, *Little Seed*, and *Seeds of Change: Planting a Path to Peace*.

The analysis reveals the empowering nature of seed narratives which represent seeds as anthropomorphized characters or metaphorical motifs, but most essentially, as "vibrant matter" with agency and "storied matter" with the power of narration. These stories also exhibit the profound entanglement of seeds and children in an agentic assemblage of collective vulnerability, which not only blurs the line between the human and vegetal, but also negotiates power hierarchies embedded in the world ruled by adults. However, negotiations may not always lead to the deconstruction of hierarchies and norms. They depend on which aspect or dimension of the seed-child entanglement is constructed. *The Bad Seed* delves into the personal dimension of the seed-child entanglement, in which a seed character's self-expressions about who he is are highlighted. By depicting a disruptive seed with a child's "bad" behaviors, the representation of the bad seed challenges the adult's superiority and empowers the marginalized children. Situating the seed-child entanglement in an intergenerational relation, *Stay*, *Little Seed* uncovers the authority of a mother tree in influencing and controlling her little seed's growth process. Although the story shows the uniformity of the plant kingdom and human society regarding relatives and families, it reinforces the socially constructed adult/child hierarchy by representing seeds as more vulnerable life forms than trees. *Seeds of Change* applies the seed-child entanglement to a social dimension, demonstrating how the webs of kinship can emerge as egalitarian intra-generational relations and challenge social authorities and power hierarchies. Instead of anthropomorphizing seeds as child characters, this story overlays seeds as a metaphor of hope with the story of real tree seeds being carried and cared for as part of regeneration projects.

In conclusion, this study posits that seed narratives have the potential to reveal seeds' agentic power and to explore the physical and metaphorical interconnectedness between seeds and children. These narratives play with the asymmetry between adults and innocent children as they reflect upon the differences between matured plants and tiny seeds. By offering words and images as mechanisms

to combat the plant disparity awareness, seed stories remind “us of our fundamental connections to nature—to plants, to animals, soil, seasons, and the process of evolution itself” (Hanson 12).

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