

Lagoonscapes

Venice Journal
of Environmental Humanities

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Vol. 2 – Num. 2
December 2022



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari



e-ISSN 2785-2709

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The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities

Editors-in-Chief
Stefano Beggiora
Serenella Iovino

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press
Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia
URL <https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni4/riviste/the-venice-journal-of-environmental-humanities/>

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The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities

Semestral journal

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Publisher Edizioni Ca' Foscari | Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari | Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italia | ecf@unive.it

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THE NEW INSTITUTE Center for Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice gratefully acknowledges the support of THE NEW INSTITUTE Foundation gGmbH.



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Scientific certification of the works published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari: all essays published in this issue have received a favourable opinion by subject-matter experts, through an anonymous peer review process under the responsibility of the Advisory Board of the journal. The evaluations were conducted in adherence to the scientific and editorial criteria established by Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

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Arboreal Ecocriticism

edited by Scott Slovic and Shiuhuah Serena Chou

Introduction

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What happens to an academic discipline as it reaches maturity? It is striking to observe just how quickly ecocriticism, or ecological literary studies, has risen from obscurity to prominence within the global community of humanities scholars during a span of the last four decades. In 2023, we can see that ecocriticism has made its way through several recognisable phases, or ‘waves’, since the field was named by William Rueckert in 1978. One feature of the most recent wave of ecocriticism, which Scott Slovic calls ‘the fifth wave’, is the tendency of scholars to ‘go public’ with their social and environmental concerns, writing not only for academic journals but also for popular media, such as blogs and mass-distribution news outlets. Another aspect of the rapidly maturing field of ecocriticism is the development of very specific sub-fields, or micro-disciplines, each of which has the potential to grow into a free-standing area of academic research and teaching.

Examples of recent micro-disciplines that have sprouted from the fertile seedbed of ecocriticism include astro-ecocriticism, cli-fi studies, empirical ecocriticism, precarity studies, and specific national or regional perspectives within ecocriticism. In proposing what he calls ‘the Astropocene’, Michael J. Gormley applies various ecocritical lenses to the study of interplanetary nature narratives in his 2021 monograph *The End of the Anthropocene: Ecocriticism, the Universal Ecosystem, and the Astropocene*. Numerous books and articles concerning climate fiction have been published in the past decade, ranging from Antonia Mehnert’s *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016) to Adeline Johns-Putra’s collection *Climate and Literature* (2019). Indian scholar Pramod

K. Nayar has led the way in introducing ‘precarity’ as a key concept within ecocritical studies, building on some of the decolonising paradigms advanced by environmental justice ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism and offering such monographs as *Bhopal’s Ecological Gothic: Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny* (2017) and *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019). The application of empirical methodologies from the social sciences to the study of environmental texts has become known as ‘empirical ecocriticism’, and this methodological innovation is another sub-field within ecocriticism that has the potential to blossom as a bona fide humanities discipline that will contribute a uniquely quantifiable perspective on how texts inspire various thoughts and feelings among audiences – this work has been piloted in a number of individual articles and special journal issues (see *ISLE*, Spring 2020), with a foundational collection due to be published in 2023. Since 2016 or so, numerous volumes showcasing specific national, regional, and subcultural approaches to ecocriticism and the environmental humanities – such as Africa, Bangladesh, East Asia, Japan, Latinx, Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Turkey, to name only a few examples – have proliferated. Each of these has the potential to become a free-standing branch of ecocritical and interdisciplinary, environment-oriented humanistic inquiry.

In recent years, scholars such as John C. Ryan, a contributor to the current special issue, have also pioneered another powerful sub-field within ecocriticism: the exploration of how specific species, such as plants, are represented and contemplated in human cultural texts. Ryan’s 2017 monograph *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* is a foundational work of botanical ecocriticism. Ryan and his colleagues have further refined this plant-centred approach to ecocriticism in such volumes as *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017), *Forest Family* (2018), *Seeing Trees: A Poetic Arboretum* (2019), and *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (2021). To further sub-divide the ecocritical interest in plants, there has emerged an even more focused movement in the field, during the past two or three years, which explores the cultural meanings and textual representations of trees. Several collections and monographs – such as Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione’s *Trees in Literature and the Arts: Human Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (2021) and Anna Burton’s *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (2021), to name a few examples – have foregrounded the special place of trees (and the absence of trees) in the human imagination. This has been the case throughout human history, but particularly during an era of changing climate and the deforestation wrought by spreading aridity, violent new storm patterns, intensifying wildfire seasons, and ongoing tree-cutting industries, we find ourselves attuned to the meaning of trees in our lives with more acuteness and nostalgia than ever before.

The articles collected in this special issue devoted to what we are calling “arboreal ecocriticism” exhibit this tree-consciousness in a variety of cultural, linguistic, and national traditions, including Australian Aboriginal poetry, Moroccan fiction, Indian activist prose, Turkish shamanistic fiction, French literature, and Taiwanese folklore. These are surely just a few branches of the tree of arboreal fiction, which could likely be extended to include every society on Earth. Before long, given the trajectory of ecocriticism, there may be sub-sub-fields focusing on mangrove ecocriticism, cactus ecocriticism, deciduous ecocriticism, evergreen ecocriticism, etc. There could also be studies focusing on the strong activist theme within tree-related environmental literature, such as Xu Gang’s *Wake-up Woodchoppers!* (1988), Julia Butterfly Hill’s *The Legacy of Luna* (2000), and Wu Sheng’s *The Poet Who Plants Trees* (2017). We offer the seven articles that follow as a stylistically and topically diverse array of studies, hoping that this work will help to call attention to a growing interest among ecocritics in the meaning of trees in our lives.

A key voice in American environmental literature, Indiana-based writer Scott Russell Sanders, once lamented our tendency in the modern world to separate ourselves from the material world of nature and relish the “perfection of our technological boxes” (1991, 226). This was originally published in 1987, before the ubiquity of mobile devices expanded the control of technology over our lives, further mediating our conscious contact with the more-than-human world – and before the rise of material ecocriticism and such concepts as “transcorporeality”, which help us to appreciate the presence of “nature” even within our mediated, technology-dominated spaces. For Sanders, the importance of “see[ing] the world in ecological perspective”, which means appreciating our own lives in relation with fellow humans and with non-human organisms and forces, called for seeking out activities that deliberately facilitate awareness of such relationships. In his essay “Earth’s Body”, published in 1993, Sanders stretched his thinking about the need for physical contact with the natural world further by telling the story of waking up in the middle of the night and wandering into his backyard garden to commune with a tree:

I shuffle to the nearer tree and read the braille of the bark with my fingers. Roots hump beneath my feet. Overhead, leaves form a canopy of black lace. I press my cheek and chest against the sharp ridges of the bark and wrap my arms around the trunk. My hands do not meet, the maple is so stout. (45)

The writer finds this experience to be mysteriously comforting, somehow confirming his kinship with a being that outwardly appears very different than himself and confirming his sense of belonging in the

world. This special issue of *Lagoonscapes* likewise confirms what many scholars in the humanities have long suspected about ecocritics. Many of us are indeed ‘tree-huggers’, lovers of the nonhuman world (particularly trees) and humans alike. But this issue also demonstrates that we are tree-thinkers, scholars who recognise the semiosis, the cultural and psychological significance of trees – their deep importance, which includes but goes well beyond the value of their material fibre, in our lives.

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Gija Jumulu: Arboreal Ecocriticism and the Australian Boab

John Charles Ryan

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Abstract The idea of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendrocriticism* – reflects the burgeoning interest in vegetal life within the Environmental Humanities. Concerned with arboreal texts of diverse kinds, dendrocriticism can be understood as a tree-focused mode of environmental, literary and cultural analysis. This article theorises dendrocriticism in relation to the boab (*Adansonia gregorii*), a large tree endemic to Northern Australia. Narrating boab subjectivity and corporeality, the arboreal texts discussed here include Alec Choate’s poem “Prison Tree, Derby” (1978), Bill Neidjie’s verse narrative *Story About Feeling* (1989), Tim Winton’s novel *Dirt Music* (2001) and Veronica Lake’s poem “Boab Tree” (2012), the latter written from the perspective of Gija Jumulu, a massive boab relocated two-thousand miles from the Kimberley to Perth. In response to global forest decline, prospective areas of dendrocritical focus include, inter alia, the traditional botanical knowledge of indigenous people, scientific studies of vegetal cognition and the limits of dendrocentrism – the privileging of trees over other plants.

Keywords Arboreal ecocriticism. Dendrocriticism. Environmental humanities. Alech Choate. Bill Neidjie. Tim Winton. Veronica Lake. Gija Jumulu.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Gija Jumulu: The Displacement of a Boab. – 3 Dendrocriticism: Critical Readings of Forests and Trees. – 4 Arboreal Subjectivity: Aboriginal Australian Perceptions of the Boab. – 5 Arboreal Corporeality: Dendroglyphs, Prison Trees and Boab Bodies. – 6 Conclusion: Dendrocriticism in the Anthropocene.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Ryan, J.C. (2022). “Gija Jumulu: Arboreal Ecocriticism and the Australian Boab”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 189-206.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/001

1 Introduction

This article develops the idea of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendro-criticism* – in response to the growing attention to plant life within the Environmental Humanities. On the one hand, dendrocriticism addresses the imperilled status of forest ecosystems globally. On the other, this tree-attuned mode of ecocritical thinking and practice recognises – and engages with – increasing public and scientific awareness of forests as intelligent systems essential to confronting the environmental and social precarities of the present. The article’s theorisation of dendrocriticism, in particular, emphasises the subjectivity and corporeality of arboreal life in reference to the boab (*Adansonia gregorii*), a charismatic tree endemic to Northern Australia and culturally significant to the region’s Aboriginal people.

In 2008, an ancient boab known as Gija Jumulu was transplanted in toto two-thousand miles from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to Kings Park in the state capital of Perth. Although ostensibly successful, the relocation raises questions regarding the capacity of trees to experience the trauma of dispossession. After discussing the case of Gija Jumulu, the article turns to an analysis of representations of *Adansonia gregorii* in diverse boab texts including Alec Choate’s poem “Prison Tree, Derby” (1978), Bill Neidjie’s verse narrative *Story About Feeling* (1989) and Tim Winton’s novel *Dirt Music* (2001). In the context of global forest loss, potential focal points for dendrocriticism include the traditional botanical knowledge of indigenous people, scientific research into vegetal cognition and the limits of *dendrocentrism* – the privileging of trees over other plant forms.

2 Gija Jumulu: The Displacement of a Boab

In combination with nutrient-poor soils and other environmental constraints, the isolation of the Australian land mass over millions of years has given rise to pronounced terrestrial and marine biodiversity. Many Australian species, including 91% of flowering plants, are endemic, that is, occurring nowhere else in a noncultivated state (Steffen et al. 2009, 7-8). Australia’s 330 million acres of forest constitute 17% of the land area (Commonwealth of Australia 2018, 2). Of this overall acreage, indigenous forest estates – owned, managed or accessed for cultural purposes by Aboriginal Australians – represent 173 million acres primarily consisting of eucalypt and acacia species (3). Totalling half of Australia’s arboreal cover, indigenous forest estates also contain 126,000 registered indigenous heritage sites such as rock paintings, dendroglyphs, gnamma holes, birthing stones and ceremonial grounds (21). Due to its predominantly arid ecology, however, Australia remains exceptionally vulnerable to cli-

mate change, species loss, soil erosion, water contamination and other ecological urgencies. Meanwhile, the clearance of ancient forests under the banner of neoliberal progress continues at a perilous rate (Evans 2016). The World Wildlife Fund ranks Eastern Australia (comprising the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania) among eleven global *deforestation fronts* – regions facing imminent, catastrophic tree loss – along with the Amazon, Congo Basin, Greater Mekong and Sumatra. Deforestation in Eastern Australia is a consequence of agricultural, pastoral and mining pressures as well as urban expansion (World Wildlife Fund 2015, 33-4).

Although rare, unpredictable and logistically complex, the transplanting of native trees deemed obstacles to development does occur in Australia. Across the country, from New South Wales to Western Australia, ‘salvage harvests’ rescue slow-growing, long-lived grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea spp.*) and other vulnerable species from decimation especially in suburban areas (Replants.com 2022; State of NSW 2017, 36-7). A salvage event garnering extensive media attention was the relocation of Gija Jumulu, a gargantuan 750-year-old boab tree (*Adansonia gregorii*) trucked two-thousand miles south from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to Kings Park in Perth, the state capital. Occurring in July 2008, the unprecedented four-day operation involved the longest known terrestrial journey of a tree of this size (Government of Western Australia 2021). Weighing 79,000 pounds, Gija Jumulu presented a formidable impediment to the construction of a highway bridge in the Kimberley. Two years later, arborists at Kings Park observed the appearance of necrotic tissue, the removal of which left extensive scarring on the trunk. Notwithstanding uncertainties over the tropical tree’s acclimatisation, in 2016 the pockmarked boab was declared “fighting fit” and the difficult relocation, “a success” (Fernandes 2016). In my visits to Kings Park between 2008 and 2015, though, Gija Jumulu always struck me as out of place in the Mediterranean environment of Perth, an arboreal refugee displaced unsympathetically from the monsoonal Kimberley, a region in Northwest Australia having its own seasonal patterns and climatic cadences.

The botanical genus *Adansonia* is a charismatic tree endemic to Africa, Madagascar and Northern Australia (including the Dampierland, Central Kimberley, Northern Kimberley and Victoria Bonaparte bioregions in Western Australian and the Northern Territory). Ecolinguistic research suggests that patterns of human movement influenced the distribution of the Australian boab in Northern Australia via long-distance seed dispersion (Rangan et al. 2015). Although tolerant of a wide range of habitats, boabs often cluster along seasonal waterways and floodplains. As the only boab species found outside of the African continent, *Adansonia gregorii* exhibits a unique upright flower, most likely an adaptation to pollination by the black flying

fox (*Pteropus alecto*) (Groffen, Rethus, Pettigrew 2016). Alluding to its distinctive bloated trunk, nineteenth-century botanists referred colloquially to the boab as 'bottle tree' and 'gouty stemmed tree'. In the late 1830s, for instance, explorer George Grey (1841) commented:

There was a very remarkable feature in the appearance of this part of the country, caused by the number of gouty stemmed trees [...] These trees grow to a considerable height, and had the appearance of suffering from some disease, but from the circumstances of all of them being affected in the same way, this was undoubtedly their natural state. (111-12)

Praising the boab's edible fruit and gum, Grey (1841) described the species as "a vegetable production of no slight value" and "well known to the natives, for its vicinity is one of their favourite haunts" (112). Similarly extolling the fruit's pleasant flavour, botanist Joseph Maiden (1889) noted the vernacular names "sour gourd" and "cream of tartar tree" (4). In 1895, moreover, Charles Gerber became the first biogeographer to theorise that the *Adansonia* genus originated in Australia and reached Africa via a Gondwanan land bridge (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 312). The modern scientific consensus, nonetheless, maintains that the diffusion of *Adansonia* occurred long after the breakup of Gondwana. Considering that boab fruits are often dispersed by water, transoceanic migration from Australia to Africa is plausible (Bell et al. 2015, 2).

In the history of Australian botany, the boab has been an arboreal curiosity - an 'upside-down tree' as well as a living link between continents and timescapes. Yet, beyond the triumphalist narrative of Gija Jumulu's relocation - a media story rousing the Australian arboreal imagination more than a decade ago - Perth writer Veronica Lake's "Boab Tree" (2012) evokes empathy for the ancient tree as a percipient individual. In Lake's poem, told from the tree's point of view, Gija Jumulu laments the trauma of violent expulsion from the Kimberley - from "my country, my dreaming" - where, for millennia, the boab nourished "the Gija; these be my people" (ll. 5, 10). "Ripped from my heart-place", the tree-speaker travels "south into exile [...] to soil that chills my soul" (ll. 13-14, 16). Although welcomed with a smoking ceremony by Perth's indigenous Noongar people, the boab asserts, in the poem's final line, this is "not my country, not my dreaming" (l. 20). Lake's verse, accordingly, presents a multilayered counternarrative to the state-promulgated version of the boab's displacement in which the tree lacks agency and voice. At the same time, "Boab Tree" underscores that - as sentient personae who belong to particular places - trees have their own Dreamings (lived narratives of creation) intimately connected to Country (land and all that exists). A variant of Gija Jumulu, denoting a "big-bellied tree", Gija Ju-

mulu is a general designator for boabs in the Gija language, spoken by about one-hundred residents of the Halls Creek and Kununurra areas of the Kimberley (Rangan et al. 2015, 8). Enacting an arboreal ethics of care, Gija Elders performed a farewell smoking ceremony to facilitate the boab's transition from its ancestral Country to the urban habitat of Perth: "We want to smoke him because we feel sorry for him. We hope that nothing will happen to your people for taking him out. That's what the smoking means, we don't want people to get sick" (Kings Park and Botanic Garden 2018, 22"-32").¹ The Gija Elders' attention to sustaining human-tree equilibrium also characterises the verse narratives of Gaagudju Elder Bill Neidjie (1989), discussed later in this article within the framework of arboreal ecocriticism or *dendrocriticism*, for short.

3 Dendrocriticism: Critical Readings of Forests and Trees

The case of Gija Jumulu's two-thousand-mile relocation from the Kimberley to Perth provokes an array of critical questions. Is the transplanting of an imperilled tree an act of ecological altruism or an expression of anthropocentric humanism that elides the capacity of arboreal life to experience the trauma of dispossession? How might arboreal subjectivity – understood as a tree's potential for experience, sensation, behaviour, learning, memory and communication – figure into decision-making processes within the intensely managerialist paradigm of environmental conservation? And, more broadly, how might the continuity of human-forest traditions, particularly among indigenous societies, be preserved and strengthened in an era of pervasive biocultural decline? These and other questions fall within the scope of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendrocriticism* from the Greek *déndron* for 'tree' – characterised as a tree-attuned mode of environmental, literary and cultural analysis. On the one hand, dendrocriticism responds to the vital importance yet precarious status of forest ecosystems globally. To be certain, forests make life on Earth possible by nurturing terrestrial biodiversity, regulating water quality, mitigating climate shifts, affording habitats for pollinators and directly supplying food, fibre, medicine, shelter, well-being and other forms of sustenance to humans and non-humans (FAO, UNEP 2020, 162-3). Global deforestation and forest degradation, nonetheless, continue to accelerate, with an estimated one billion acres of forests converted to agricultural and other uses since 1990 (FAO, UNEP 2020, xvi). On the

¹ Kings Park and Botanic Garden (2018). "10-Year Anniversary of the Mighty Boab Tree". Facebook, 19 July. <https://www.facebook.com/KingsPark.WA/videos/10-year-anniversary-of-the-mighty-boab-tree/1791601467593999/>.

other hand, dendrocriticism recognises – and is informed by – emerging understandings of forests as complex symbiotic systems vital to addressing the interlinked environmental and social challenges of the Anthropocene (Popkin 2019). Indeed, scientific research into tree perception, communication and intelligence has begun to suffuse popular thinking, forming the basis, for instance, of Richard Powers’ recent Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) as well as botanical non-fiction such as David George Haskell’s *The Songs of Trees* (2017) and Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021).

Considering ecocriticism’s steady diversification – in conjunction with the wider societal reawakening to trees – dendrocriticism presents a timely ecohumanistic intervention through its arboreal emphasis. Over the last two decades in particular, ecocriticism has branched into various specialisations underpinned by affect studies, animal studies, biosemiotics, decolonial theory, ecofeminism, geocriticism, postcolonial critique, science and technology studies and other theoretical terrains (Ryan 2020). Evolving from studies of animals in literature, animal texts represent animal life and human-faunal relationships. Zoocriticism, therefore, can be defined as the analysis of individual and collective – wild and domesticated – animals as depicted in literary-cultural works. This animal-focused mode of criticism confronts the animal-human divide normalised through neocolonialism, globalisation, speciesism and other contexts. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) elaborate, zoocriticism addresses animal representations, problematises the othering of animal life and underscores the urgencies of interspecies justice. For Huggan and Tiffin (2010), postcolonial zoocriticism foregrounds a spectrum of issues – from wildlife protection and introduced animals to meat consumption and the role of zoos in popular culture (18). In turn, zoocriticism has profited from the florescence of human-animal studies, a transdisciplinary field examining social and cultural attitudes towards animals (Kalof 2017). Building, then, on this progression – from human-animal studies to zoocriticism to animal texts – arboreal texts can be described as those representing trees, forests and human-sylvan interactions while dendrocriticism is the reading of literary-cultural texts through an arboreal optic. Dendrocriticism reflects current debates in vegetal ethics developed within the nascent field of human-plant studies (Ryan in press). My call for dendrocriticism – as an ethical, heterogeneous and transdisciplinary practice – consolidates foundational ecohumanistic studies of forests including Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), Jeffrey Theis’ *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England* (2005), Albrecht Classen’s *The Forest in Medieval German Literature* (2015) and Elizabeth Hope Chang’s *Novel Cultivations* (2019), among others. Furthermore, while concerned specifically with the boab, this article recognises the rich tradition of trees in contemporary Aus-

tralian literature, evident, for instance, in Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus* (1998) and Germaine Greer's memoir *White Beech* (2013).

In sum, dendrocritical practice strives to understand the complexities of arboreality beyond its arrogation as a screen – as a symbol, metaphor or trope – for the projection of human desire. In this way, dendrocriticism countervails critical methods that construct trees as the voiceless, decorporealised and sentimentalised backdrops of narratives. As such, dendrocriticism constitutes a response to long-standing ecocritical calls for alternatives to analytical frameworks that reduce trees and other non-human beings to “nothing more than a textual function” (Buell 1995, 5). Echoing Michael Marder's (2013) philosophy of plant-thinking, dendrocriticism endeavours to allow trees to “maintain their otherness” by encouraging respect for “the uniqueness of their existence” (8). Recognising the arboreal as an active presence and contributing agent in the world, dendrocriticism considers the ways in which the dynamism of trees, forest communities and human-sylvan assemblages shapes the contours of cultural productions. Dendrocritical analysis thus seeks to articulate how trees ‘talk back’ to – and intervene in – the cultural record (Vieira 2017). What's more, while engaging generatively with the science of plant cognition, this specialised mode of ecocritical practice interrogates the prevailingly positivist discourses surrounding tree specimens, species, genera and communities. In addition to its focus on ethics, dendrocritical analysis integrates ideas of arboreal agency, semiosis, temporality, corporeality and emplacement (Ryan 2018, 1-26). With postcolonial-ecocritical bearing, furthermore, dendrocriticism scrutinises the neoimperial legacies impinging on forest vitality while, at the same time, foregrounding indigenous people's epistemologies of trees – or what might be termed *traditional arboreal knowledge*. These and other dendrocritical orientations are integral to examining literary depictions of the Australian boab.

4 **Arboreal Subjectivity: Aboriginal Australian Perceptions of the Boab**

A traditional humanistic conception of subjectivity tends to privilege the agency and consciousness of the individual (see, for example, Pinn 2021). In contrast, arboreal subjectivity foregrounds the distributed subjectivity proper to trees as percipient agents with endemic modes of intelligence expressed within ecological milieux. The possibility of ‘vegetal subjectivity’ has been debated within human-plant studies (for example, Hall 2011; Marder 2020; Meeker, Szabari 2020). In *Radical Botany* (2020), Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari contend that, in their divergence “from human and animal models of subjectivity, consciousness, and perception, plants represent a challenge to

an orthodoxy that places humans at the center of the cosmos” (29). Like Meeker and Szabari, Marder (2020) maintains that the very idea of vegetal subjectivity destabilises normative constructions of subjectivity by stressing relational coexistence over individuated identity. In such terms, arboreal subjectivity is more than the anthropomorphisation of trees or the projection of humanised ‘personhood’ on vegetal being (Hall 2011). In addition, the concept of arboreal subjectivity incorporates ideas of communication, memory, kinship and altruism in forests underscored by plant cognition research (Baluška, Gagliano, Witzany 2018; Baluška, Levin 2016). Nevertheless, while plant studies has scrutinised the idea of subjectivity in relation to Western science, philosophy and literature (Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira 2017a), researchers have placed less emphasis on the modes of arboreal perception, feeling and consciousness narrativised in indigenous literary works with animist underpinnings. Indeed, integral to a dendrocritical approach to *Adansonia gregorii* is Aboriginal Australian knowledge of boabs as bearers of subjectivity – as sentient Creation beings who impart biocultural wisdom to humankind.

Boabs are central to the cultural narratives and practices of the Aboriginal people of Northern Australia. Among the Yarralin of the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory, the Dreaming being Walujapi (a female black-headed python) scattered the seeds of trees, including boabs, as she walked across the land (Rose 2000, 42). Local people recognise certain large boabs as sacred trees marking the route Walujapi travelled (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 65). While implicated in Creation stories, boabs also hold considerable everyday material significance. Boab roots offer sources of water in arid environments while the fibrous wood of the trunk can be boiled and consumed as an emergency provision (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 67). Crushed boab pulp has been used to make a beverage sweetened with bush honey, in turn, collected oftentimes from old hollow boabs themselves, as narrated in Neidjie’s long poem *Story About Feeling*: “So e can get im honey. | E can look bush-honey there... hollow tree” (1989, 29, ll. 18-19). The edible fruit described effusively by George Grey and other nineteenth-century explorers can be mashed into a liquid and administered to newborns. What is more, Kimberley people carved various images into boab trunks to create dendroglyphs vital to the biocultural heritage of Australia today (Department of Natural Resources 2011). Grey (1841) surmised that the “successive rows of notches” scratched on boabs indicated “the number of nuts taken each year from the tree” (112-13). Exchanged, gifted or marketed as tourism objects, boab nut carvings featuring historical events and natural phenomena disseminate place-specific cultural knowledge, often internationally (Jebb 2006). Published in 1959, Mary Durack’s classic *Kings in Grass Castles* fictionalises some of the traditional uses of *Adansonia gregorii*. The novel, more specifically, alludes to the construction

of canoes “from the scooped-out trunk of a boab tree which [Aboriginal people] used in bringing mangrove timber from one of the gulf’s islands. In this unique craft they had also made short voyages of exploration” (Durack 1997, 259).

In Neidjie’s *Story About Feeling* (1989), boabs and other primordial tree-beings command respect as ancestral subjects. As an arboreal text tracing oral cosmologies, *Story About Feeling* centres on *djang*, the primordial force that enlivens Gaagudju Dreaming and inspires human-tree relations. *Story About Feeling* manifests Neidjie’s desire to communicate his deep, generational knowledge of Country, Law and the Dreaming to both Aboriginal people and non-indigenous Australians. “Tree”, the poem’s second part, takes the form of an in-depth dialogue between Neidjie, his people and his arboreal progenitors who taught him how to live in balance with the Earth (Neidjie 1989, 21-38). Among the poem’s twelve sections, “Tree” stands out for its intensive narrativisation of the traditional arboreal knowledge of the Gaagudju whose Country encompasses World Heritage-listed – and uranium-rich – Kakadu National Park. Published two decades before Gija Jumulu’s relocation, the following lines portend the removal of the massive boab in 2008 for the construction of a highway bridge:

So I said...
 ‘Well you must knock im down’.
 I didn’t say...
 ‘You might feel it...’
 I said...
 ‘E’s alright, doesn’t matter
 because we need that road’.
 (Neidjie 1989, 22, ll. 9-15)

Throughout “Tree”, Neidjie deploys the radically-inclusive, subjectivity-dissipating pronoun “e” to enfold the human and arboreal within the animate and elemental, the terrene and cosmic. This destabilisation of significatory convention blurs strict Western boundaries between the human, arboreal and celestial. Neidjie’s writing, moreover, positions arboreal subjectivity in terms of empathic identification between people and trees. In this regard, the line “You might feel it” connotes the shared interspecies ramifications of knocking the tree down “because we [settler societies] need that road”.

As a relational mode of interdependent coexistence between life forms, arboreal subjectivity entails human feeling for – and with – trees, thus echoing the Gija Elders’ empathic response to Gija Jumulu: “We want to smoke him because we feel sorry for him” (Kings Park and Botanic Garden 2018, 21”-24”). Comparably, the speaker in *Story About Feeling* admonishes a young man for carelessly chopping down an ancient tree:

Yes...
I chop it down that big tree.
I play...I cut it, yes'.
'You cutted yourself!
When you get oh, about fifty...
you'll feel it...
pain on your back
because you cutted it.
(Neidjie 1989, 25, ll. 1-8; italics in the original)

Composed in Aboriginal English, a dialect of standard Australian English, Neidjie's verse enunciates the intercorporeal implications of ecological vandalism - of transgressing the Law governing respectful exchanges between Gaagudju people and trees over millennia. Rather than ontologically predicated on individualisation, the arboreal subjectivity poeticised in *Story About Feeling* asserts the porous co-constitution of humans, trees and others: "*you'll feel it... pain on your back*" (Neidjie 1989, 25, ll. 6-7). The narrator's pressing concern over violating the big tree's right to flourish reflects the Gija Elders' trepidation over Gija Jumulu's displacement from the Kimberley. The violence of cutting defiles the tree as an embodied presence (an arboreal form to be perceived) as well as a percipient subject (an arboreal being to be engaged) who listens, responds, dreams, feels and flourishes within an ecological milieu:

That tree e listen to you, what you!
E got no finger, e can't speak
but that leaf e pumping his.
Way e grow in the night while you sleeping...
you dream something,
that tree and grass same thing...
e grow with your body, your feeling.
(Neidjie 1989, 23, ll. 4-10)

"Tree" intimates an Aboriginal conception of dendro-subjectivity that recognises more-than-human sensation and discloses the potential of trees for embodied response. In this way, Neidjie's work also adumbrates what might be called *arboreal corporeality*. The next section elaborates this idea further in relation to boab dendroglyphs and prison trees, the latter featuring in a poem by Western Australian writer Alec Choate (1978).

5 **Arboreal Corporeality: Dendroglyphs, Prison Trees and Boab Bodies**

With their roots, rhizomes, cambium, sapwood, heartwood, piths, trunks, branches, foliage, flowers and other anatomies, trees are corporeal agents – enfolded beings with bodies radically different yet uncannily kindred to our own. Aboriginal narratives such as Neidjie’s “Tree” inflect indigenous understandings of *arboreal corporeality*. This premise suggests that trees and other vegetal beings possess diverse sense faculties facilitating somatic relationalities within life-worlds (Ryan 2022). In contrast, the Western botanical paradigm tends to renounce the sentient bodies of arboreal beings through engrained suppositions about trees as nothing more than biochemical repositories, mechanical assemblages and appropriable materials. As a countertradition foregrounding the dynamic temporal emergence of the plant body, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe poetically formulated the science of vegetal morphology in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, first published in 1790. The polymath delineated the “laws of metamorphosis by which nature produces one part through another, creating a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ” (Goethe 2009, 5-6). Goethe theorised the *Bauplan*, or body plan, as a framework delineating the features of segmentation, proportion and positionality that constitute the plant corpus as an integrated whole. Extending the plant-thinking of Goethe and others, dendro-criticism underscores the role of arboreal corporeality in mediating diverse human-tree relationships. Considerations of embodiment are especially resonant vis-à-vis the often large, corpulent and voluptuous bodies of Australian boabs inscribed by settlers and converted into makeshift bush prisons throughout the nineteenth century in Northern Australia (Farrell 2016; Grant, Harman 2017; Martin 2013).

Western Australian writer Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001) deftly evokes trees as vibrant presences. In the novel, boabs suffuse the *genius loci* of the Kimberley. As the itinerant poacher-fisherman Luther Fox approaches the town of Derby while hitching a ride in the back of a truck, the charismatic trees appear with growing frequency: “Their smooth flanks shine after the rain. They stand fat and close, and to Fox they’re preposterous and lovely, like a crowd lining the highway, hip to hip, all arse and head-dress in the sun” (Winton 2001, 258). Although Winton’s diction – “smooth flanks”, “fat and close”, “hip to hip” – analogises the bodies of trees to those of people, the boabs remain “preposterous and lovely” in their deviation from familiar human modes of corporeality. Later in the narrative, while camping on an island, Fox immerses himself in the pleasures of the treescape including:

the hot warm boles of the young boab trees he brushes with his fingertips in passing. The shapes of those trees delight him. Lean-

ers, swooners, flashers, fat and thin. At the edge of them all is one huge ancient tree, festooned with vines and creepers, whose bark is elephantine. There's a glorious asymmetrical splendour about it; it makes him smile just to catch a glimpse as he passes. When he climbs it he finds an ossuary on its outspread limbs where some hefty seabird has hauled mudcrabs aloft to feed on. The broken hulls are thick and white as china plates. (Winton 2001, 307)

The passage corporealises the boabs in their "glorious asymmetrical splendour". More than objects of Fox's aesthetic gratification, however, the trees are microhabitats in themselves; seabirds feeding on mudcrabs in a primordial boab have created an ossuary of hulls as "thick and white as china plates". As the story progresses, the protagonist's interactions with boabs intensify, revealing the affective bonds between people and trees. In a sensuous gesture dispelling the perceptual distance of his initial arrival in Derby, Fox eventually embraces "the slender boabs beside the midden. After sundown their skins are still warm against his cheek" (336).

As these excerpts from *Dirt Music* reveal, boab corporeality is closely connected to the trees' emplacement. One of the objectives of dendrocriticism is to articulate how emplacement - the embodied negotiations between trees and their ancestral habitats - contours the lives of trees and the texts representing them. The corporeal emplacement of *Adansonia gregorii* reflects the species' physiological adaptation to Northern Australian ecosystems over millennia. Older boabs' distinctive bloating, for instance, results from the development of water-sequestering parenchyma cells in response to intermittent rainfall. In arid environments, the short and stout trunks of boabs ensure their survival - as well as the continued existence of other organisms depending on the trees - during periods of drought (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 139). Poetry narrating a sense of Northern Australian place often alludes to the particular corporeality of boabs. In Les Murray's "Order of Perception: West Kimberley" (2013), the "inverted boab trees | flowering on plateaux" (34, ll. 7-8) engender topophilia, an affective disposition towards place. Murray's "Kimberley Brief" (2006), moreover, characterises the eponymous region as "that land of the boab tree" (352, l. 4). Bodily images of *Adansonia gregorii* also feature in Peter Goldsworthy's "Anatomy of a Metaphor" (2017) with its visceral evocation of the "plum-colored boab bulb with thick upspreading roots, | multi-tentacled squid head squirting jets of red ink | squat bull toad bloating and unbloating" (77, sect 2, ll. 12-14). In Bundjalung poet Evelyn Araluen's "Boab" (2021), furthermore, boabs like eagles spiraling overhead constitute part "of this country's muscle" as denizens of Country who know "what to take and where to put it" (76, ll. 5, 7). For Araluen, as for Murray and other poets with arboreal sensibilities, the boab is an integral part of the perceptual order of Northern Australia.

The legacies of boab inscriptions and bush prisons, however, represent enduring colonial impositions on the arboreal body. Across Northern Australia, large boabs bear the historical markings of imperialism. As a case in point, during the North Australia Expedition, Augustus Charles Gregory's party left inscriptions on a boab at Timber Creek in the Northern Territory announcing their departure date - "July 2nd 1856" - and indicating the location of a letter detailing their whereabouts in case of their disappearance (Gregory, Eelsey 1858, 81). Another example is the Derby Prison Tree, a tentacular boab purportedly used as an interim holding cell for Aboriginal prisoners, although this history remains contested. Elizabeth Grant and Kristyn Harman (2017), for example, characterise the Derby Prison Boab's carceral past as a fabrication of dark tourism that peripheralises the tree's sacredness to local Aboriginal people. Notwithstanding the mythologisation of boabs as jails, Alec Choate's "Prison Tree, Derby" (1978, 35) evokes the tree's corporeality in relation to the trauma of incarceration:

Touch this gnarled wood, the scooped out
Body of this boab tree,
And it answers stone, or steel.
(Choate 1978, 35, ll. 1-3)

Choate's narrative poignantly articulates the human-non-human suffering caused by dispossession from land, community and relation: "For here was a prison cell. | Here Man was a kept shadow" (ll. 10-11). Considering the tree's embodiment of this traumatic history, the speaker finds it "strange that leaves | Can still draw life through its walls" (ll. 12-13). The poem's final lines express the human captive's desire for freedom as well as the tree's longing for the liberation of its body appropriated for a cruel agenda: "The unrusting manacles | And bars of the roots' system | Strain deeper, and hold them back" (ll. 25-27). Boab prisons and bark inscriptions such as the Gregory Tree and Derby Prison Tree are examples of living 'boab texts' that highlight dendrocriticism's focus on the textual heterogeneities surrounding trees (Farrell 2016; Martin 2013, 229-31).

6 Conclusion: Dendrocriticism in the Anthropocene

This concluding section briefly outlines potential trajectories for dendrocriticism as a mode of ecocritique inspiring a broader societal shift from the Anthropocene era of pervasive biodiversity loss to the Planthroposcene as "an aspirational episteme [...] in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants" (Myers 2017, 299). To begin with, building on work at the intersection of

ecocriticism and Indigenous studies (for example, Monani, Adamson 2017), dendrocriticism places emphasis on the traditional botanical knowledge and perceptions of indigenous peoples, rural communities and subsistence farmers, among others. In this context, dendrocritics explore the cultivation of plant-based epistemologies through oral works, print-based texts and multimedia narratives – from performances and films to digital art and social media productions. Informed by decolonial practice, dendrocriticism would supply a transdisciplinary basis for examining issues of biopiracy and, specifically, the commercialisation of tree-based foods, fibres, medicines and decorations used customarily by indigenous societies (Subramaniam 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Consider, for instance, the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) integral to the Ayurvedic medical system of India. In 2005, a ten-year campaign led by author-activist Vandana Shiva overturned a patent on an anti-fungal product derived from the tree (*BBC News* 2005). A dendrocritical stance on the commercialisation of neem foregrounds the analysis of heterogeneous arboreal texts such as *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, which refer to neem over one-hundred times as the healing agent *Nimba*, Sanskrit for “to give good health” (Rama Murthy et al. 2017, 577).

In dialogue with scientific notions of plant cognition, dendrocriticism formulates new concepts of tree health, well-being and flourishing while examining the complexities of ethics, justice, pain, suffering and intergenerational trauma in the arboreal world. As forests decline globally in the wake of anthropogenic climate upheavals and myriad interrelated factors – ecological, social, political and otherwise – the death of trees and human modes of mourning arboreal loss present significant directions for ethically-engaged transdisciplinary critique (Cunsolo, Landman 2017). Dendrocriticism offers an optic, as well, for illuminating engrained cultural perceptions of weed trees and invasive species in contrast to those regarded as native, desirable, charismatic and therefore of heritage value (Coates 2006, 112-50). What is more, dendrocritical analysis investigates the burgeoning area of interactive vegetal writing, music and art, exemplified by boundary-pushing works such as Wendy Burk’s interspecies poetry collection *Tree Talks: Southern Arizona* (2016) and Jane Tingley’s digital art installation *Foresta Inclusive* (2020). Dendrocriticism, furthermore, nurtures the development of novel approaches to incorporating subjectivity and corporeality into tree research methodologies, a concern flagged by anthropologist John Hartigan (2017). Dendrocriticism, indeed, responds to geographers Owain Jones and Paul Cloke’s (2002) call two decades ago for “more serious recognition of non-human agency in social scientific [and humanistic] enquiry into nature-society relations” (48). Finally, dendrocriticism appraises the limits of *dendrocentrism* – the privileging of trees over other plants – and envisions critical approaches to vegetal life that resist

the marginalisation of bushes, shrubs, orchids, herbs, mosses, liverworts and other comparatively diminutive forms. Although far from an exhaustive elaboration of potential directions for dendrocriticism, these recommendations call attention to the range of ecohumanistic scholarship included within its ambit.

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Arboreal Attachment/Detachment The Felling of a Lonesome Tree in Muhammad Zafzāf's “The Sacred Tree”

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Abstract This study interprets Muhammad al-Zafzāf's “The Sacred Tree” in light of a myriad of social, political and religious constructions that surround a sacred tree and its cutting, a decision taken by the government and implemented by workers hired by the authorities. This short story is from the eponymous collection written in 1980 by the late Moroccan writer, one of the most famous Arabic-language novelists, short story writers and poets in Morocco in the 20th century. I hope to shed some light on the interplay between the local and the universal in relation to the sacred and the profane, manifested as the dialectic and yet often incongruent relation between the natural and the sacred as well as the modern and the traditional. The analysis highlights the critical stance the author takes towards the outdated and superstitious beliefs that still take hold of his society, perhaps hoping to bring about some change.

Keywords The sacred tree. The sacred. The profane. The political. The social. The superstitious. Upheaval. Change.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Sacred. – 3 A Political Oppressive Force. – 4 The Sacred, the Superstitious and the Profane. – 5 The Felling of the Tree: the Populace and the Authorities. – 6 Conclusion.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Marroum, M. (2022). “Arboreal Attachment/Detachment. The Felling of a Lonesome Tree in Muhammad Zafzāf's ‘The Sacred Tree’”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 207-218.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/002

1 Introduction

“The Sacred Tree”, a title quite significant, perhaps ironic, as the first sentence of this short story highlights the indifference of some educated youth to the cutting of a sacred tree. They even smile with derision and contempt. One cannot but speculate about the reasons for cutting such a tree as well as the reasons behind the youngsters’ mockery.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the “arbori-culture” in Muhammad Zafzāf’s text and its impact on the lives of various characters. The short story at hand is from the eponymous collection written in 1980 by the late Moroccan writer, one of the most famous Arabic-language novelists, short story writers and poets in Morocco in the 20th century. Owain Jones and Paul Cloke in *Tree Cultures: The place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* refer to the term “‘arbori-culture’ especially relating to myriad social constructions which positioned trees as anything from sources of timber to living spirits” (2002, 3). Clearly, the myriad of social constructions in “The Sacred Tree” are specific to the Moroccan culture, despite some universal elements. Ronak Husni and Daniel L. Newman, the translators of the story into English, attest to this fact. In their view, the story here provides a good example of the type of prose and subject matter tackled by Zafzāf:

The language is Standard Arabic, yet clearly Moroccan (or North African) in the way it is used, with a number of peculiarly Moroccan usages. This fits in well with the subject, which, despite certain universal features, is quintessentially Moroccan and reveals a great many things about that country’s contemporary society. (Husni, Daniel 2008, 57)

More specifically, the aim of this paper is to reveal the interplay between the local and the universal in relation to the sacred and the profane, manifested as the dialectic and yet often incongruent relation between the natural and the sacred as well as the modern and the traditional. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade asserts that “*sacred and profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (Eliade 1959, 14; italics in the original). As we shall see, not only do the youth of the opening paragraph reveal this interplay but also women and the crowd – some onlookers to the cutting of the tree, a decision made by the government and implemented by workmen hired by the authorities. Interestingly, the sacred tree and its felling are the object of conflicting views that lead to contention and social unrest.

2 The Sacred

Some anonymous women in “The Sacred Tree” reveal the aetiology of the tree and its sacredness:

People said he [Sidi Larbi - or Sidi Daud] had planted the tree where his soul had migrated. It was also said that nobody had planted this tree, but that it had just appeared one day in the clearing, as though it had been there for years. (Zafzāf 2008, 62)

The word ‘Sidi’ in North Africa is a nomenclature of people of high social or religious status. It is also used as an epithet for Saints as is the case in Zafzāf’s text (Husni, Daniel 2008, 68). In “Sacred Groves in Morocco: A Society’s Conservation of Nature for Spiritual Reasons”, Ulrich Deil, Heike Culmsee and Mohamed Berriane note that

Orthodox Islam does not allow any veneration of saints. In contradiction, the religious practices of Moroccan Muslim societies are based on the appreciation of the spiritual authority of patron saints (Marabout or Marabut). (2007, 187)

For some, the tree in Zafzāf’s text is ostensibly what Eliade refers to as a “hierophany”, a term he uses to “designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred”. He asserts that “[m]an becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane” (Eliade 1959, 11). He explains that

the history of religions - from the most primitive to the most highly developed - is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities. From the most elementary hierophany - e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree - to the supreme hierophany (which for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act - the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world. (11)

Moving to the universal, we learn from Pamela R. Freeze and S.J.M. Gray that the sacredness of a tree or of a group of trees characterises almost every culture and religion of the East and West. They write:

Trees are a form of nature that represent life and the sacred continuity of the spiritual, cosmic, and physical worlds. A tree is often used to symbolize a deity or other sacred beings, or it may stand for what is sacred in general...

The physical properties of trees are combined with the supernatural or sacred ideas, the beliefs that surround a tree's connection with what constitutes religion in different cultures....Trees represent certain deities or ancestors, serve as mediators or links to the religious realm, and are associated with cultural beliefs in heaven or the afterlife...

Through association with particular religious or historical event, an individual tree or species of tree acquires the symbolic significance of the events as part of its meaning...

A society's religious beliefs about what kinds of trees that are sacred generally depends on the nature and number of trees found in its territory. (Freeze, Gray 1995, 26)

Undoubtedly, the sacredness of the tree in Zafzāf's text does not stem from its nature, but from its association to Sidi Daud. In fact, the text does not provide any information about the genus of the tree and its physical character. The only given information about it is that it is a lonesome tree in an abandoned place, standing on a brown sandy hill-ock, in the middle of a clearing, where some construction is underway.

3 A Political Oppressive Force

The arbori-culture in "The Sacred Tree" is closely linked to the political, namely a political oppressive force. In a powerful scene, full of pathos, the story intertwines the political, the natural and the human. The government's attempt to proceed with the cutting of the sacred tree leads to the assembly of a crowd and to a cordon of auxiliary security forces who form a tight circle to prevent anyone from approaching the hillock where the tree stood. One might think that their presence is to protect the tree. However, this is not the case. Quite the contrary, they are there to facilitate and speed up the task through violent means. The troops hit the crowd that has gathered behind the hedge with their batons on their shoulders and knees. This results with laments, "perhaps it was a child being trampled underfoot, desperately clinging to its mother, barefoot and covered in rags" (Zafzāf 2008, 59). One cannot but notice that oppressive force is inflicted on the weak and the poor people. It is not surprising for the author to include such a scene as

Like others in his generation (such as Muhamad Shukrī), Zafzāf gave a voice to ordinary Moroccans, especially those living on the margins of society. His is a literature of social realism, arguing the cause of those who cannot express themselves, often doing so in the local vernacular. (Husni, Newman 2008, 56-7)

Mohammed Albakry and Roger Allen in “The Literary World of Muhammad Zifzāf: Three Short Stories” concur that Zafzāf, in his short stories

is interested in realism without idealisation or romantic subjectivity, but he always exhibits sympathy for his main characters, people from different stratas of society and products of a wide variety of social, political and psychological influences. The major concern of his short stories, however, is with marginalized characters within society. (Albakry, Allen 2007, 129)

4 The Sacred, the Superstitious and the Profane

Zafzāf’s text exemplifies a paradoxical facet of arbori-culture that reveals the clash between the sacred, the superstitious and the profane through the reactions of women, youngsters, the populace, and some detached onlookers to the cutting of the tree – all nameless characters. While some are in favour of the cutting of the trees, others are not. Ironically, their disapproval does not stem from their love of nature as one might expect, but from the superstition and outdated beliefs that the author manifestly endeavours to criticize.

A conversation between two women puts to the fore various facets of superstition that still permeates the minds of some. A woman, who pulls back her snotty-nosed child fearing that he will be hit by the batons of the troops, addresses another woman who is reluctant to carry a conversation. The former reveals her detachment from the sacred tree when she states: “What’s that tree got to do with us?” (Zafzāf 2008, 60). In her opinion, the government wants the curse of Sidi Daud to fall upon it. She strongly believes that not one of them will be able to sleep that night without something bad happening to them. As for the latter, she believes that the government is indifferent, as the curse will fall on those performing the task of cutting the tree. She states:

It’s the poor devils that are cutting the tree that’ll be hit by the curse. The *makhzen* keeps well clear of it. They’re always making people dig their own graves, while they make sure they’re out of harm’s way. (Zafzāf 2008, 60)

According to Husni and Newman, the *makhzen*, which literally means ‘storehouse’, stands in the peculiarly Moroccan sense of the word as “the authorities” (Husni, Newman 2008, 68). The authorities’ lack of empathy is not surprising, as the text has already put forth an image of a government that is oppressive and violent. Such oppressive political force leads the woman to fear the repercussions of her state-

ments. She realises the danger of such talk, and starts to tremble with fear, anxiously looking around. She fears that one of the agents of the government would hear the conversation and would arrest her and take her to the police station where she would be tortured: “She would be flogged and hung like a sheep from a butcher’s hook in one of the cells” (Zafzāf 2008, 60). Her priority as a widow is to feed her three children. Out of fear, in a corrective standpoint, she retorts that the government knows what it is doing, stating that it would not cut the tree without any valid reason.

The negative views and reactions towards the sacred that the tree and Sidi Daud embody, proliferate as we move on in Zafzāf’s text. On the one hand, there is the fear of being cursed by Sidi Daud. One woman asks another woman: “So, you’re not afraid of the curse of Sidi Daud? Shut your mouth or he’ll come to *you* when you’re asleep to-night!” (Zafzāf 2008, 60; italics in the original). Undoubtedly, the tree as a hierophany is for her and for some others a source of fear. On the other hand, there is a reaction of detachment and anger towards the sacred. The second woman retorts angrily that she has not done anything to Sidi Daud and that she is just a poor widow trying to take care of her children as best as she can. She leaves the crowd, as she does not want to have any problem either with the police, or with Sidi Daud whom she never saw. All the more so, as his grave was not in the clearing. More significantly, this same woman recounts that she had appealed to him only once when her husband was on his deathbed but this did not help. A few days after visiting the tree, Sidi Larbi – or Sidi Daud – had taken her husband’s soul. It is interesting to note that she believes he – and not God or illness – has taken her husband’s soul as one might think. She depicts Sidi Daud as a malevolent power. Hence, the tree as a hierophany does not have the power to avert or cure illness, contrary to trees that are represented as a source of healing in many cultures.

Some youngsters, like the two women, put forth a negative image of the sacred and ironically the natural as well. Their reactions range from mockery, indifference and the criticism of the lingering superstition in their society along with a criticism of the state. As stated earlier, the text opens with a group of youngsters with some degree of education who smile with derision and contempt. The narrator highlights their indifference in two rhetorical questions:

What did it matter to them if they cut down a tree in an abandoned place? What did it matter to them, even if it was a towering tree in a garden heavy with delicious fruit that fell because it was ripe or rotten, or remained hanging from the branches? (Zafzāf 2008, 59)

Interestingly, the youngsters’ indifference is also towards the tree as a natural element. They seem to be indifferent to both the sacred and

the profane that the tree embodies. Eliade elucidates the paradoxical nature of every hierophany, no matter how elementary it is. He states:

By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. (Eliade 1959, 12; italics in the original)

We also learn that these same youngsters were stretching themselves to have a better look at the crowd that was milling around. They did not pay any attention to the work that was going on in the middle of the clearing where the lonesome tree stood. Since these youngsters are somehow educated, one might conjecture that education leads them to criticise the quasi-religious aspect of the tree. However, this is not the case, as some poor uneducated women have also been critical. Carrying on with the conversation, one of the youngsters adds: “Fair enough, but this magical nonsense should be rooted out. They continue to worship this tree” (Zafzāf 2008, 59). His companion believes that they will worship it even more once it has been cut down. To this, the former comments: “Quite the contrary, they’ll forget all about it” (60).

The youngsters’ conversation underscores the clash between the sacred and the profane as well as tradition and modernity, another facet of arbori-culture that has its impact on people’s lives. When one of the youngsters criticises the state saying, “That’s what the state does best”, the other retorts:

What’s it to you what the state does? What do you care if they cut a tree? The day after tomorrow they’ll build a modern building, and that won’t have anything to do with you either! The money for the rent won’t go into your pocket! (59)

Paradoxically Zafzāf’s text highlights the youngsters’ detachment from modernity. More so, the narrator early on in the text, underscores the gloominess of modern architecture, pointing to concrete and darkly coloured buildings behind the tree:

Behind it, there were panels of reinforced concrete that were being carefully and slowly erected. Behind the high-rise panels, there were darkly colored buildings in which the window frames had not yet been installed, the giant gaps redolent of the gaping maws of mythical animals. (59)

5 The Felling of the Tree: The Populace and the Authorities

There are two antithetical standpoints and reactions towards the felling of the tree. As seen, the first part of the story incorporates dialogues of youngsters and women who are detached from the tree or have a critical stance towards the sacred and what it engenders from superstition, rituals and outdated practices. By contrast, the second reveals the populace's attachment to the tree by means of vivid and highly descriptive scenes, somehow theatrical, which are void of dialogues, with the exception of the following one.

A conversation between some onlookers watching the cutting of the tree exemplifies what Leslie Sponsel sees as components of the sacred in terms of artefacts in a special context. One onlooker believes that the next day, or the day after, a building will be constructed on the resting place of Sidi Daud's soul. In reply, someone asserts that the lingering attachment to the sacred will remain even after the cutting of the tree. He thinks that people will call it "Sidi Daud" Building" and will hand candles and amulets along its walls, thus corroborating Sponsel's definition of the sacred and how it is manifested. In "Do Anthropologists Need Religion, and Vice Versa? Adventures and Dangers in Spiritual Ecology", she points to the connection between the religious and the natural - with the sacred being a component of religion. She explains:

Religion is usually focused on the sacred as a special domain of ten contrasted with the profane or ordinary. The *sacred* includes extraordinary ideas (myths, symbols), behaviors (rituals and ceremonies), and artifacts (material culture) in special contexts (place and time). The extraordinary may involve feelings of mystery, awe, power, transcendence, tranquility, unity, and/or healing. (Sponsel 2001, 178)

Several visual scenes focus on the populace's reaction to the cutting of the tree. First, the crowd gathers in protest around the clearing during and after the cutting despite the harsh physical conditions, let alone the threat of a violent police:

The sun seared the bodies in the crowd, while the people had become unrecognizable because of the dust and debris flying around. All that could be seen were the drops of sweat glistening on their noses. The noise of the bulldozer in the clearing continued unabated. A few of the workmen were whiling away the time by playing with the ropes attached to the tree trunk. Behind them, the rifles were still trained on the crowd. A government order must be enforced to the letter. (Zafzāf 2008, 62)

It is interesting to note that the tree, during its felling, is stripped from any religious connotations. Its natural characteristics come to the fore. As a sacred object, the tree was a source of fear for some, and so it is as a natural element:

Then, the trunk and branches could be heard to crack, and the tree fell to the ground. Some of the workmen let go of the ropes and ran off. Behind them, the policemen also beat a hasty retreat. None of them felt like having their eyes poked out by a falling branch. (62)

Subsequently, the cutting of the tree leads to more than a simple protest. It leads to social unrest and clashes between the security cordon that turns its attention to the people in a threatening manner. Still, the felling of the tree attracts even more people, some leaving their shops to see what was going on, some at a distance and others close by. The text also zooms in on the arrival of two cars that stop before the crowd. The police chief goes out of one of them, preceded by a few of his men, who set about clearing a path for him. His arrival triggers feelings of shock among the people. Some begin to curse him in a very quiet voice, while the police officers lash out in every direction.

As stated earlier, the arbori-culture in Zafzāf's text is closely linked to the political. The arrival of the chief police to the site where the sacred tree stood reinforces the interplay between the natural, the political and the social. In a very powerful scene, we see the contrast between those who lose their composure (the people and the soldiers) and the calmness of the police chief:

The party was surrounded by a cloud of dust. Only the police chief knew how important it was to appear cool and indifferent. The slightest movement could trigger no end of unrest and chaos, especially in matters as sensitive as this one. Dust flew up. Then, there were cries, and the fleeting movement of batons and rifle butts. All this was necessary at such a time. (64)

What follows is a commentary on political rulers, though Husni and Newman, the translators of the short story at hand assert that Zafzāf is not a political writer; he simply foregrounds many aspects of his county's contemporary society. They state:

this is no pamphlet or treatise dressed up as a work of fiction. Rather, it is fiction with a social conscience, drawn from real-life events; the realism is palpable and the narrative enthralling, with tragedy often commingled with comedy. (Husni, Daniel 2008, 57)

Nonetheless, one can neither ignore the comments on political rulers that are highlighted in "The Sacred Tree", nor their universal valid-

ity, thus giving this part of the story the characteristics of a somehow political pamphlet:

The biggest ruler in the world only has to do one thing – to keep his nerves under control. The greatest head of government, whether minister, police chief or whatever, all of them have to make sure of only one thing, namely keeping themselves under control. (Zafzāf 2008, 64)

The political commentaries clearly posit a contrast between those who implement orders and any head of state. Whereas the former lose control, the latter retains his composure, thus revealing a superior nature, which in reality is nothing but an appearance of composure. Clearly, the text underscores the hypocritical nature of leaders in a satirical manner:

However, those who receive orders do not control themselves. Sometimes they, of their own accord, think they are enforcing an order that has come down to them. Any head of state is capable of receiving a slap in the face and still continue smiling in front of television cameras. People will admire him precisely because he did not react the way they would have done, indeed, as they do for the slightest thing. However, when the camera lights are not trained on him, that very same leader can just as easily give the order to destroy tens of cities. Afterwards, he will hold grand speeches, cloaking himself in the innocence of one who respects his fellow man. (64)

Moving away from universalities, the text zooms in again on the police chief's composure, despite the ongoing commotion and violence, in an attempt to perhaps validate the comments stated above.

Arms and voices rose, with rifle butts piercing the sky, sometimes hitting a baton or a skull. There were screams, faces oozing with blood, bodies collapsing to the ground. The police chief never made the slightest movement; he tried to prepare himself for when he would become a minister, standing in front of a television camera. (*Stand firm! The hour of vengeance is near, and you will be able to destroy tens of cities.*). (64; italics in the original)

With the focus on the political, the tree and its sacredness seem to have seeped into the background, except for a reference to the crowd that is described as “those people who worshipped this tree”, and to their feelings towards its cutting: “Feelings of anger, fear, hatred, courage and cowardice enveloped the tree that lay lifeless on the ground” (66). Nonetheless, it is the characteristic of the tree as a hi-

erophany that leads to the violent upheaval, thus foregrounding the sacredness of the tree in an indirect manner. A scene describes the dust that covers the police chief's face as well as the crowd's face. Still the chief does not lose his composure and retains his stern smile. Even when a stone from an unknown source lands on his head and fractures his skull, he retains the smile on his lips. He sinks into the dust covered in a pool of dust and soil. What follows is undoubtedly reminiscent of war scenes:

The troops opened fire. Stones were flying through the air, heavy with dust. Shots rang out, though no one knew where they were coming from. Bodies fell; others fled, scattering in every direction, pushing and shoving one another. A cloud of dust rose up. It was a fully-fledged battle, total chaos. (66)

The war scene, with bullets flying everywhere, is overshadowed by the focus on the police chief:

Everything became blurred: the laments, the weeping and dying screams. The police chief's lips still had a smile on them, despite the blood and soil, as though tens of cameras were crowded around him in order to get a shot of him. (66)

The story ends with the people dispersing out of fear. Fear permeates the story from beginning to end, whether it is the fear of the curse of Sidi Daud or the oppressive political power.

The people began to disperse. The narrow streets became empty as the doors and windows dotted along the haphazardly built walls were shut. Eyes appeared through the chinks and crannies in the walls, windows and doors. However, these eyes did not see anything except the troops, spread out across the clearing or posted at the entrance of the maze of squalid alleyways in which the sewage and garbage had amassed.

Some shopkeepers, greengrocers, spice merchants and other small traders left their goods in order to take shelter wherever they could. A few old women who sold henna, herbs, locally produced soap and various magic paraphernalia such as rats' tails, and crows' heads, scattered in every direction, abandoning their wares on the pavement. (66)

Zafzāf does not fail, once again, to paint an image of society governed by a distorted image of the sacred. It is also governed by a hypocritical self-absorbed political power represented by the chief lying on the soil, still smiling as though nothing has happened, summoning the police officers to take him to one of the cars.

6 Conclusion

One might conjecture that Zafzāf's aim in this short story is to instigate some social change through what Ross Chambers labels, in *Room for Maneuver: Reading Oppositional Narrative*, "a politics of oppositionality". This politics is a form of resistance available to the relatively disempowered. In Chambers' view, "Oppositionality seeks, that is, to shift desire from forms that enslave to forms that liberate" (Chambers 1991, xvii). He believes that "such change is the phenomenon that occurs when one reads a book – whether a work of fiction or not – and is 'influenced,' that is changed, by it" (xi-xii). He suggests that

such "influence" is best accounted for as that which brings about a change in *desire* – the further implication being that to change what people desire is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the way things are. (xii; italics in the original)

Perhaps Zafzāf wants his readers to have a change of desire that would lead them to abolish the superstition and outdated beliefs that still take hold of his society or any other society.

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Toward an Arboreal Poetics

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Abstract This is the third of four dialogues between the characters ‘M’ and ‘L’. In the second dialogue, “Planetary Poiesis”, the pair begin to discover how patterns of bifurcation in the cosmos have a deep kinship with patterns of bifurcation in human thought and language. However, the concept of arboreal poetics puts this idea under pressure, opening up further insights into the relationship between bifurcation and poiesis. Moreover, the term arboreal poetics (not unlike zoopoetics) has the potential to point in several directions at once. The aim here is to imagine several possible categories that can help map the vast terrain of the relationship between trees and poiesis.

Keywords Arboreal poetics. Zoopoetics. Poiesis. Biosemiosis.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Moe, A.M. (2022). “Toward an Arboreal Poetics”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 219-238.

Prologue

This is the third of four dialogues between the characters “M” and “L”. Each dialogue explores some facet of the relationship between the Poiesis of the Earth and the Poiesis of human language. In order, the dialogue titles are,

- “Aristotle’s *Poetics* & Sperm Whale Poiesis”;
- “Planetary Poiesis”;
- “Toward an Arboreal Poetics”;
- “Stillness, Deep Time, & the Corpse; or, An Ode to Eros”.¹

In the second dialogue, “Planetary Poiesis”, M and L begin to uncover how patterns of bifurcation across the cosmos have a deep kinship to the patterns of bifurcation in human thought and human language. “Toward an Arboreal Poetics” continues the exploration but with a focus upon the bifurcation of trees. Additionally, the term arboreal poetics (not unlike zoopoetics) has the potential to point in multiple directions at once. The aim, here, is to envision several possible categories within arboreal poetics that can help map the vast terrain of the relationship between trees and all things poiesis.

The dialogue is not truly dialectical in that M and L often mirror each other’s thoughts rather than representing differing perspectives. It’s not a debate; they are not trying to *win*. They are open to new ideas, and they aim to deepen understanding through a leap-frog approach to discourse.

L Have you come across the term *arboreal poetics* yet?

M I have just recently, and I am very much intrigued by it.²

L Me too. Ideas within all things *poetics* move so quickly. When Brenda Hillman writes of a “hydropoetics” in *Practical Water*, one can suddenly envision a pyropoetics, a geopoetics, a thermal poetics (2009, 85). And that was well over a decade ago. We have a zoopoetics, too.

M Why not arboreal poetics?

1 The fourth dialogue, “Stillness, Deep Time, & the Corpse; or, An Ode to Eros” will appear in *Miranda*’s special issue focusing on representations of animal corpses guest-edited by Claire Cazajous-Augé. It gives “L” and “M” the space to fully develop the ideas on Eros. The first dialogue, “Aristotle’s *Poetics* & Sperm Whale Poiesis, a Dialogue” can be found in the edited collection *La ‘Poetica’ e le sue interpretazioni: Aristotele tra filosofia, letteratura e arti*. The second dialogue, “Poiesis”, is forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to Eco-poetics*.

2 In a 2020 journal article, H.J. Yulianto uses the term “arboreal poetics” in the title. The argument exemplifies not only the presence of trees within poetry, but also how such a presence deepens one’s ‘ecological awareness’ and urges one toward ecological ethics (Yulianto) – which is one facet of arboreal poetics. This dialogue suggests and explores several additional facets of what arboreal poetics might suggest.

- L It has potential to open up fresh ways of thinking about trees and storytelling. But the challenge before us concerns what the term might even mean.
- M Should the term be mapped? Or just used? Sometimes when humans map a term, we end up arguing over the map thereby eclipsing the dynamics the term points toward. It's why Ishmael shares in *Moby-Dick* that *true places are never mapped* (2004, 99). They can't be. In the act of selecting one reality, a map deflects others.³ Even through revealing, a map can distort and conceal.
- L But we can't just let the term sit. Usage, by default, sketches a map. And even if people argue over what counts as the map, such work *is* valuable. It adds to the dialectical process of deepening our understanding. Look at what happened with zoopoetics. Derrida first used the term in his phrase "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" (2008, 6). At first, the map just pointed toward the fact that animal representations infuse Kafka's storytelling.
- M And not just his storytelling, but stories and myths and language the world over. From Turtle Island to phrases such as *wolfing down food*.
- L But Derrida's use, at first, focused on Kafka. Others expanded the map to include the sheer vastness of animal presences within the literary and cultural imagination. We cannot shake animals out of our stories, our poems, our language, our consciousness. Poiesis, the making of a story, depends upon animals.
- M Then, as we know, the map of zoopoetics extended to include the study of how animals have their own processes of poiesis, and not just the making of webs or nests, but also the clicks within clicks within clicks of sperm whale - what to call it? Semiosis? Poiesis? Language? And many species, including spiders, have the agency to undergo "ontological and semiotic innovation" in response to where and when species meet, to echo Haraway (2008, 240).⁴
- L As I see it, four main categories of zoopoetics exist. We could, perhaps, use these categories to point toward what arboreal poetics might include.
- M Perhaps, but categories always break down. As *Moby-Dick* queries, how do you map "chaos bewitched" or the "howling infinite" or Ahab's soul or Ishmael's grief (2004, 43, 165)? If we outline some categories, it has to be within the understanding

³ This line alludes to Kenneth Burke's terministic screens.

⁴ For more on sperm whale poiesis, see Moe's "Aristotle's Poetics & Sperm Whale Poiesis, a Dialogue"; for more on spiders, see Moe's chapter "Vibrational Poiesis of Insects and Arachnids" in *Ecocriticism and the Poiesis of Form*.

that there is something about zoopoetics and arboreal poetics that is *vast* - that cannot be fully represented through a categorical map.

- L Of course. But aren't you tempted? I mean, one of the phrases that has stuck with me over the years is from an obscure line by William Carlos Williams: "Chaos | feeds the tree" (1988, 238). He uses the term before chaos theory, though chaos theory - with its emphasis on fractals, turbulence, and bifurcating patterns of (dis)order - can be a great way to further enrich his insight.
- M I am tempted. If *chaos feeds the tree*, perhaps *chaos feeds the poem*, too. Such a statement points toward a deep kinship between the tree and the poem.
- L And think of how arboreal poetics might frame all of *Moby-Dick*, for Ishmael writes "out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters" (2004, 401). Chaos, no doubt, feeds the unfolding, branching form of Melville's masterpiece not unlike the unfolding, branching processes of trees in an old growth forest.
- M I feel as though such a space in language is sacrosanct. And if we just 'map' it, then we have the epistemological understanding of how chaos feeds the poem and the tree, but not the ontological experience of the relationship between chaos, language, and the tree.
- L Or, perhaps, the relationship, in the cosmos, between chaos and any manifestation of a bifurcating form... whether it be a tree; or an artery branching into capillaries; or a river splitting into a delta; or an idea branching into chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words, and sounds.
- M How do you map that?
- L We should at least try, proceeding, though, with openness and caution. I still think the categories that have emerged in zoopoetics could be helpful.
- M And, right now, there are four overarching categories.
- L Yes, starting with Derrida's initial phrase. They are as follows: Zoopoetics includes (but is not limited to) an exploration of...
1. the ways in which nonhuman animals infuse the literary and cultural imagination, the world over;
 2. the ways in which nonhuman animals, in their own right, are makers, undergoing processes of poiesis (this may be a quibble, but zoosemiosis doesn't go far enough; zoopoiesis, on the other hand, foregrounds the act of making signs rather than just the signs themselves);
 3. the ways in which, to echo Haraway, animals (including humans) experience "ontological and semiotic innovation"

when and where they meet (2008, 240) - interspecies interactions shape poiesis;

4. the ways in which zoopoiesis in all of its manifestations raises ethical questions and actions given the fact that we live on a shared planet.⁵

M We switch between 'poetics' and 'poiesis' with intention; for clarity, it might be good to revisit the nuances of these terms.

L Sure enough. I see 'poetics' to be the study of 'poiesis'; and 'poiesis' is the *act of making* in all of its verb-ness, so to speak. Though the word 'poiesis' functions like a noun, it is like the word 'environment' which holds the verbal, *to environ*, as central to it being a 'noun' (see Mazel 1996).

M So arboreal *poetics* involves the study of arboreal *poiesis* - which raises the question, what categories might be most beneficial to understand and explore any and all poiesis involving trees?

L Yes.

M Well, concerning the first category, representations of trees (like animals) infuse the cultural and literary imagination, the world over. So many Myths involve trees. So many stories and poems. The massive tree in Norse Mythology...

L ... Yggdrasil...

M ... yes, to the vast cedar forest in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Olive and laurel trees loom large in Greek Mythology.

L And we have the Tree of Life... and the Tree of Knowledge...

M ... and we have the Pear Tree in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the tree-scar in Morrison's *Beloved*. Representations of trees infuse the poetry of Merwin, the poet-planter. He might be one of the few humans to have actually planted a *forest* over five decades; each one of his poems, too, can be seen as a planting. Also, a host of leaves tremble in e.e. cummings' work.

L And we have everything from Tolkien's talking Ents, to Pixie Hollow, to the trees in the movie *Avatar*, to the Ewok village, to the Bristlecone Pine of *ISLE*, to the Maple Leaf on Canada's flag - and countless more examples of how representations of trees infuse and shape stories and culture.

M This category of arboreal poetics is, like representations of animals, something *vast* (to echo Derrida) and worthy of study.

⁵ Reducing zoopoetics to just four categories risks undermining the depth of each category as well as the rich messiness of the borders between each category. For more on zoopoetics, see Driscoll and Hoffmann's edited collection, *What is Zoopoetics?* (2018).

- L What are your thoughts on the second category? The possibility that trees are, in their own right, *makers* – how they may engage in processes of poiesis not unlike animals who have the agency to make and respond to signs?
- M Concerning the second category, biosemiotics has shown that from the cell “all the way up” life happens through processes of semiosis to echo Wendy Wheeler’s idea from “The Biosemiotic Turn” (Wheeler 2011, 270). An interpretive agency or proto-consciousness is at work when a cell draws on the inert DNA, reads it, and figures out what to become (Hoffmeyer 2008, 32). If cells can do this, we should not be surprised that trees (on a much larger scale) are makers too. They communicate with each other across mycorrhizal networks. They make signs. A wounded or disease-stricken Aspen tree sends chemical signatures to the rest of the grove.
- L I appreciate how you begin with the question of a tree’s agency. That’s an argument that needs to continually be made. Even if someone hesitates to see a tree as having an agency to make, send, and respond to signs, we can see trees as *makers* of their own materiality. They draw on earth, water, air, in order to *become*. They make needles or leaves; they make flowers or cones.
- M But the moment someone realises what a flower or cone actually is, the idea of tree-as-maker deepens.
- L Especially across Deep Time. It’s important, I think, to recognise that arboreal poiesis includes the present, yes, but also the processes of poiesis across the Deep Past on into the Deep Future. Of course, Cummings wrote of the “leaping greenly spirits of trees” (1991, 663). Trees don’t leap relative to humans, but relative to trees, a branch might take a century in order to “leap forth” – especially on an Ancient Bristlecone Pine.
- M True enough. And, as we have discussed, plants existed on the planet first without any seeds. It took a journey across 100 million years for plants to compress a text of their form into a seed. That process depended upon biosemiotics, but I also see the journey of making a seed, making a cone, across Deep Time as an act of poiesis.
- L The mere fact that a Bristlecone Pine grows from a seed exemplifies a poiesis across Deep Time that people often take for granted.
- M People may doubt the sanity of this discussion, for we are teetering upon the idea that a forest has consciousness with a Deep Past. But that’s why biosemiotics is a game changer. If a cell has an agency to read and respond to the text of DNA – if a cell, that is, has a kind of ‘knowingness’ – then why should anyone doubt that a forest, too, has a kind of knowingness? The know-

- ingness of a cell, of a tree, of a forest, is all grounded in the act of poiesis, in the present and across Deep Time.
- L The flora of our gut is its own biome of swarming bacteria, that, like a forest, is constantly in a (un)making process.
- M Good point. Micro- and macro forests. All acts of poiesis. And isn't it intriguing that gut bacteria is more animal-like than plant-like, but we call it "flora"?
- L A forest of animal-critters. At any rate, trees are makers. This idea is something that arboreal poetics can include as part of its map.
- M Concerning the third category - well, things get complicated.
- L How so?
- M Well, the third category we outline for zoopoetics has to do with one species experiencing a breakthrough in their making, their poiesis, through an attentiveness to another species' way-of-being.⁶ So, with trees, does this dynamic go two ways? Do trees experience an ontological or semiotic breakthrough through an attentiveness to another species? How can anyone 'prove' that a tree has agency in its knowingness, in its attentiveness to another species? I can see many people dismiss such a claim.
- L Before we tackle that question, let's focus on whether or not humans experience a 'semiotic and ontological innovation' in their poiesis through an attentiveness to trees.
- M Sounds good. I have no doubt that humans have, at times, shaped the form of their poiesis in response to their engagement with trees. Trees have shaped human poiesis.
- L This should be self-evident. Think of Muir's passage on climbing a tree during a windstorm.
- M Exactly. He infuses a whole paragraph with onomatopoeia, so the sounds of the storm blasting the tree and forest around him become a palpable presence in human language. It's that "keen metallic click of leaf on leaf" and the "profound bass of the naked branches and boles booming like waterfalls" (1997, 470).
- L And there is also the tree-climbing passage in Jewett's "A White Heron". As Sylvia climbs the tree, the language behaves differently than other passages in that story. The sentences, phrases, and sounds respond to that sacrosanct space where the human meets the tree, to echo/extend Haraway's title *When Species Meet*.
- M So, there is a similarity here between arboreal poetics and zoopoetics.
- L Yes. And to circle back to your question, true enough, it might be difficult for some to think of a tree has having a kind of agen-

⁶ This category is thoroughly explored in Moe's *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* (2014).

cy to experience an ontological or semiotic innovation in their poiesis; however, how did a grove of trees, collectively and individually, figure out how communication is possible? How did the chemical lexicon of Aspen, for instance, become? Some people hesitate to ascribe agency to plants. Trees have no centralised 'brain'. But if biosemiotics is accurate – if a cell has an interpretive agency so as to know what to become – then it makes sense (as we have discussed earlier) that an organism made of cells, too, has agency.

- M That gives me a thought. Symbiosis depends upon a poiesis, a making, that arises out of that rarified space where and when species meet. Ample evidence exists that shows how trees become symbiotically engaged with other species. The making of a forest, the poiesis of a forest, depends a great deal upon ontological and semiotic innovations where and when species meet.
- L A *making kin*, so to speak.⁷ And all we are trying to accomplish here is to sketch a rough map of what an arboreal poetics *could* include. The poiesis of a forest is an *eco-poiesis*; it involves all organisms of the ecosystem. So, the third category of arboreal poetics is possible; we can focus on the innovations trees have discovered through interactions with other species, across Deep Time, in order to become.
- M And it could explore the ways in which humans have discovered innovations in their poiesis through an attentiveness to trees, as demonstrated by Muir and Jewett. And yet...
- L Keep going.
- M ... I think we are going to need another category for arboreal poetics. It seems closely related to this third category as it involves poiesis across tree-human boundaries – and we have nudged up against this idea before. But it seems that the concept of arboreal poetics might point toward a deeper kinship between human language and trees that needs to be articulated.
- L Are you thinking of how chaos feeds the tree and the poem? How both bifurcate?
- M Precisely. Even though we have discussed bifurcation before, the whole concept of arboreal poetics puts it in a new light.
- L I like the idea of revisiting this concept now; then we can circle back to the category involving ethics.
- M Sounds good. Really, any ethical consideration for trees will be enriched if we can adequately articulate the ideas surrounding bifurcation, trees, and human language.

⁷ This phrase echoes Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

- L To recapitulate our other discussion, Wendy Wheeler discusses the fractal nature of bifurcation to argue that biosemiosis, too, manifests itself across micro- and macroscales.⁸
- M Yes, in *The Whole Creature*, she says, “just as the ‘tree of life’ which describes evolution itself is also found in other natural systems of bifurcation (plants; lungs; blood supplies; river deltas, etc.), so we should not be surprised to find that the elaborated system of semiosis discovered in human cultural evolution is also found, in simpler forms, at every stage of life”. She sees the ongoing process of making and discovering semiosis as a kind of self-taught “education” (2009, 126), across, it is implied, Deep Time.
- L Really, an arboreal poetics could include the process of poiesis of any kind of bifurcating pattern.
- M In our earlier discussion, we tentatively suggested that bifurcation is a law of the cosmos, but the more I ponder such a claim, the more I see it as true.
- L If not a law, most definitely a *habit*. It is haunting that the word ‘dendritic’ points toward trees – but humans also use that word to describe everything from neural networks that make animal consciousness possible to the fern-like, dendritic crystallisation that emerges when snow sublimates directly to a vapour, skipping the melting-into-water stage.
- M There could be a catch, then, namely that bifurcating patterns emerged prior to the life of a tree. As we have discussed, the bifurcating pattern is found within the sage energy of the atom, and it manifests itself across the categories of element, plant, and animal.⁹ So, an arboreal poetics is just one manifestation of bifurcation. Not the first. Perhaps the most striking, though, among plants.
- L Are you saying that, yes, trees and language bifurcate, and that they therefore share a deep kinship, but that there is something prior that makes the kinship possible?
- M And the “something prior” is that bifurcation is a law or a habit of the cosmos, and its logic must originate within the logic of the atom, prior to any cell. Ani DiFranco perhaps said it best in her song, “The Atom”, when she speaks of the “magnificent consciousness incarnate” within the Atom.¹⁰ Part of this incarnated consciousness includes the energy of bifurcation. So, arboreal poetics foregrounds the *tree* as the bifurcating phenom-

8 The “other discussion” refers to the second dialogue, “Poiesis”, forthcoming.

9 This idea of “sage energy from the atom all the way up” emerges and anchors the argument in *Ecocriticism and the Poiesis of Form*.

10 DiFranco, A. (2008). “The Atom”. Red Letter Year, Righteous Babe Records.

enon, when, in reality, trees and human language are simply manifestations of a bifurcating energy that infuses the cosmos, from the atom all the way up.

- L I agree, but, at the same time, culturally, I don't think there is a better symbol for bifurcation than that of the tree. Perhaps the best way to coalesce the wild micro- and macro bifurcations of the cosmos into a starting point for exploration is through the term, arboreal poetics. Poiesis involves bifurcation, like a tree.
- M Perhaps. I fear, though, that people will stop at the tree and not push further back to the original energy that brings forth the tree. Where did bifurcation come from?
- L The "root of the root and the bud of the bud ... of a tree called life" - but is cummings right (1991, 766)? I don't know. Your concern is valid. Do we stop at the bud, or do we search for the bud of the bud? Think of this, though. If there is a sage energy of the atom, and if part of that energy tends toward bifurcation, then yes, there is a kind of knowingness at work from the atom all the way up. One could say that there is a knowingness at work in the creation of river deltas as well as the bifurcation of arteries into capillaries. However, is not the knowingness of a tree at a different level than the knowingness of a river delta? And do not the bifurcating patterns at work in language reach a different kind of degree than that of a tree? I am not trying to create a hierarchy of knowingness and bifurcation, but the fact that a tree is alive lends itself to earning its juxtaposition with the bifurcation we see in language. I mean, let's look at the sentence we diagrammed from Merwin's "Place" (1988, 64) [fig. 1].
- M It's all right there. The *leaping greenly spirits of trees*...
- L ... and the *leaping greenly spirits of language*...
- M And although diagramming sentences was developed, first, with the English language, there are ways to modify nuances to diagram sentences from all languages.¹¹
- L Otherwise translation would not be possible.
- M So, what strikes you about the diagrammed sentence?
- L For starters, the way we have etched it foregrounds the bifurcating and fractal pattern of a tree. It therefore demonstrates that language, and therefore thought, bifurcates. It just does it. It's a habit. We don't need to diagram the sentence in order

11 Somehow, I completed all of my education without ever diagramming a single sentence as a student. Three years ago, I taught myself and have integrated it into my teaching practices. Like the semiotics of mathematics, every line is fraught with meaning. In general, nouns and verbs sit on horizontal lines. Modifiers sit on diagonal lines. No other representation, it seems, better reflects the dendritic crystalline structures of thought. Along with the connection to bifurcating trees, I like to think of every diagrammed sentence as a flake of snow floating through consciousness.

for it to 'make sense' to us. Diagramming it simply foregrounds the bifurcating patterns driving the way language leaps toward thought.

- M And the diagramming reveals how a sentence resembles a fractal doll as one similar pattern nestles inside a larger similar pattern. Or, better yet, the sentence is like a single sheet of origami paper. One can make a butterfly with 12 folds; or a sea-turtle with 28 folds; or an elephant with 34 folds; or a dragon with around 46 folds depending upon how you shape the wings and tail. Unfolding each of the single sheets reveals patterns of folded paper that vary in the degree of complexity.
- L This glimpses the mystery of Merwin's enjambment, for the line breaks and stanza breaks (all couplets) disrupt the long arc of the sentence, folding thought. Sure, call it sustained enjambment, but the way that the unit of the couplet - and then just a single line - sits, with heft, in the space/time continuum of the blank page is haunting. It adds another layer to the bifurcations already inherent within the grammatical logic of the sentence.
- M I like this line of thought as it revisits one of the basic (and mystifying) questions of prose and poetry: what is the difference between language in the form of a prose sentence and language in the form of poetry? Especially when we consider spoken manifestations of language. Who cares how it is written on paper! I mean, I care, a great deal, but if we agree that language bifurcates; that bifurcation is something essential or inherent in language; that this bifurcation shares a deep kinship to the bifurcating energies manifested not only in trees but also in skeletons, blood streams, river deltas, and lightning strikes; that this bifurcating energy can be visually manifested through the art of diagramming a sentence; that this bifurcating energy is the very *stuff* of poiesis - the makings of language, makings of trees, makings of the Earth; if this bifurcating energy in language has its origin in the energy of sound, wavering into syllable, wavering into word - if all of this is, indeed, inherent within the grammatical logic of what we call a sentence or a breath of language sketched as an open-form poem - then it *should* expose the truth that bifurcation is a habit of the cosmos.
- L So, then, what does it mean to read? Think of the *scansion* of a poem, and how *scansion* comes from the Latin *scansio* meaning *act of climbing* - and how one's feet start moving when finding the rhythm of a poem, and that motion makes one start to climb, to ascend, to seemingly move through the poem in an upward direction even while reading downward. One sentence arcing across lines and stanzas grants us the intimate experience of climbing through a bifurcating energy manifest in language. One must attend to the line, the stanza, and the overall gram-

metrical time of the poem, while reading down the page - and yet an audible performance of the poem empowers us to climb, limb by limb, branch by branch, line by line, skyward.

- M To put it this way: reading a sentence, across lines and stanzas, is a *scansion*, a *climbing*, which deepens further kinship between chaos feeding both the tree and the poem.
- L One could do worse than be a climber of trees.
- M Well said. And there is more to discover in the diagram of Merwin's sentence. I am drawn to the *leaping energy* that explodes out of the preposition 'with'. With what? With the *sun*, the *water*, and the *clouds*. Three objects of the preposition, each with a participle adjective, which all explode into the canopy of this language-tree.
- L And look at the elliptical clause: *in the earth full of the dead... in the earth (which is) full of the dead*. What energy is behind this leap? We don't need "which is" - the meaning emerges regardless of the omitted words. But when we diagram it, we see the leap to another implicit clause that keeps the sentence reaching skyward.
- M And it is a line, with epic weight: *in the earth full of the dead*. All the extinctions. Past and current. All that has been destroyed and consumed. Your comment, though, makes me think even further about the kinship between all the leaps that make life happen - the leaps across Deep Time. The leap from matter to cell. From plant to seed. The leap to blossoms. The leap to zygote.
- L The leap from sound to syllable.
- M At one point in the ongoing conversations surrounding zoopoetics, a reference to Emerson's "The Poet" was made. Recall how Emerson wanted a "metre-making argument ... a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (2000, 290).
- L And Whitman gave us his *Leaves of Grass*.
- M True enough. But Emerson points toward a deep connection between the *spirit of an animal* and a *spirit of a plant* that both can shape the form/architecture of language. But the crux of the matter is simply the fact that cells, plant or animal, bifurcate. So does language. Any architecture - whether plant, animal, or poem - depends upon bifurcation.
- L And as you suggested earlier, the architectures of the dendritic crystallisation of snow bifurcate, as do tendrils of vapours or cloud wisps or vines. As does any turbulent fractal.
- M ... *knots in the grain* to echo Snyder.
- L Which might be another excellent source to think through an arboreal poetics founded upon the bifurcating and fractal forces of chaos and turbulence.
-

- M *Chaos* does, indeed, *feed the tree*.
- L And the poem.
- M I wish we could linger longer in these ideas surrounding the deep connection between the poesis of human language and arboreal poesis, but as we discuss, I sense the undertow of elegy within the ode.
- L Yes: *the earth full of the dead*. As humans, we (re)discover on a daily basis just what a marvellous planet this is, while, at the same time, we devour the Earth directly and indirectly in cataclysmic ways. Change is happening. Too fast.
- M Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.
- L Well, and the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem is not only the slow wheeling of colonialism, but also, right there with it, the dawn of the anthropocene itself.
- M It may seem counterintuitive at first, but if we are going to discuss the final category of arboreal poetics - the ways in which trees impact our sense of ethics - I want to begin back with *Gilgamesh*. I recently taught *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is a fascinating read, and it articulates with great clarity the million dollar question concerning humanity's relationship with trees, and by extension, with the Earth.
- L It's been awhile since I read *Gilgamesh*, but I remember how *Gilgamesh* and *Enkidu* totally decimate the Forest of the Cedars after slaying a monster.
- M Exactly. The gods placed the monster, *Humbaba*, within the sacred forest to act as guardian. I say *sacred* as the mountain of cedars is the "dwelling of the gods" (2019, 37); moreover, the beginning of Tablet V establishes an almost proto-ecological understanding of the rich life in the forest's canopy. It lists, with exquisite and aesthetic detail, a whole host of birds, insects, and mammals all generating this "rhythmic din" and how the trees themselves, full of abundance, "ooze" out "resin" that's "dribbling down like raindrops" (37).
- L Interesting. The description feels more like *Jewett's* and *Muir's* trees that are not 'wild' but actually a *home*. Not dangerous at all. Full of life and sounds and colour.
- M Exactly, and it makes the clear-cutting of the forest that much more tragic. After slaying the monster, they do, as you remember, make a "wasteland of the forest", so much so that while *Gilgamesh* slashes tree after tree, *Enkidu* keeps "looking for the tallest one" (2019, 47). They find it, cut it down, make a glorious door out of it, and present the door to *Enlil*, the god of the Earth. Long story short, they also kill the Bull of Heaven, and the gods decide they have gone too far. For slaying *Humbaba*, decimating the forest, and killing the Bull of Heaven, one of them must die. And here's where it gets really interesting. En-

- lil likes the door, sees Gilgamesh as the leader, and so argues that Enkidu should be the one to die, which is what happens.
- L I guess I don't quite see it yet. What's the million-dollar question?
- M Let me backup. *Gilgamesh* is the oldest written story that we have; it reaches back nearly 4,000 years. I find it moving, and depressing, and yet exhilarating that this story raises the same question that we ask today. One cannot build a city without turning something sacred (a forest) into a door. How far is too far?
- L Sure. I see it. We need (or think we need) a door. One cannot have a building, nor a city, without doors. What a powerful symbol. So, as a cautionary tale, Gilgamesh and Enkidu clear-cut a forest for one door, and the consequence is that one of them must die. That's where we, as humans, are still at! We have not yet figured out how to order our lives so that we don't cause unnecessary death by crossing the line. We ransack the Earth for plastic, and ocean-life dies. We need plastic for blood transfusions, sure, but not to carry Oreos around. Who draws the line? How can the 'needs' of a society be met in a way that does not consume the entire Earth? In a way that does not turn every sacred corner of the Earth into a resource?
- M You see it. This is at least a 4,000 year old question. Probably older, of course. There are no easy answers, but the work of a story is to carry questions and point toward insights. Another profound insight that emerges from the text is the fact that Enlil likes the door and so he preserves Gilgamesh's life. He lets someone else die who doesn't matter as much to him.
- L That is haunting. Every single *thing* we consume contributes to the decimation of the planet. Is it worth it? Is the *door* worth it? Each of us, if we are honest, has a bit of Enlil inside us. I admit it. I like air-conditioning on a 100 degree day, and if I am honest, even when it is in the upper '80s.
- M And I like driving a Prius up to a trailhead to hike in nature.
- L *Gilgamesh* foregrounds the ethical weight of the fact that *something dies* in order for us to drive to the mountains in an air-conditioned car.
- M We often think that an environmental consciousness is something that emerged recently, but it is a fact that *Gilgamesh* invites us to live out questions that prompt an environmental ethic. When is it worth it to turn a sacred forest into a commodity? And perhaps on an even more fundamental level, the story asks *what is the Earth?*
- L That is definitely a question worth living out across the decades. In a sense, Sylvia in "A White Heron" recognises that her climbing of the tree makes her a "housebreaker" (1994, 676) - she sees the forest, the Earth, as a home. *Gilgamesh* also demonstrates how the decimation of the forest took out not only the

trees, but also the homes of all the species who filled the canopy at the beginning of Tablet V. This idea of the *oikos*, the idea of the Earth-as-home, seems present right at the moment when the headwaters of Western civilisation sliced a line between city-as-home and forest-as-other.

- M You've mentioned "A White Heron" a couple of times. There's something more there, I sense?
- L There is, and it relates to *Gilgamesh*. As Sylvia climbs the tree, Jewett compares the tree to a "great main-mast to the voyaging earth" (677).
- M I had forgotten that detail.
- L It is quite profound. From the top of this tree - this main-mast, this crow's nest of the Earth - Sylvia witnesses the social intelligence and dynamics between the two herons.
- M By witnessing this interaction, she, in a sense, sees the birds - and the forest - as something sacred, and she cannot let the ornithologist/hunter know the secret as to where the herons' nest lies.
- L You remembered that part!
- M I did. But what a haunting image.
- L Jewett establishes the 'main-mast' as the last old-growth tree within a second generation forest, pointing toward issues surrounding deforestation.
- M We are losing our main-masts too fast. I remember one time, as an arborist, pruning a mature Plains Cottonwood with its wild, chaotic branchings. (I once thought the best way to explain to someone the canopy of a Plains Cottonwood is to imagine Medusa's hair alive and writhing, flexing, flickering.) Anyway, this tree had a crown well over 100 feet in diameter, and so three of us were up there, working on the tree's three massive leads, with all this voluminous space between us. A hawk swooped in and circled through the vastness of the canopy. It was strange, of course, because trees look somewhat big from the ground, but then, they can also seem so tiny. We can walk past a tree fairly quickly. But the hawk's circling presence within the canopy amplified the enormity of where I sat. Though some readers may be surprised that Sylvia can't tell the hunter/ornithologist the location of the White Heron's nest, after seeing a bird swoop around from the vantage point of the canopy of massive tree - and after witnessing the social dynamic between two Heron's - it makes perfect sense. People climb up to a crow's nest to find a sense of direction, to look for land, to look for danger.
- L Jewett suggests a view from the top of one of the Earth's 'masts', a towering tree, just might give the perspective to yank us out of our narcissistic gaze in order to actually see the health and needs of the planet. And it is from the main-mast where she

sees the Earth as something sacred. Unlike Gilgamesh and Enkidu, she doesn't cross the line. She doesn't turn the white heron into a commodity. She could have earned ten bucks if she shared the secret.

- M It seems like an insurmountable challenge: having an environmental ethic. Every generation, it seems, must work through these questions, again and again, so I am heartened (and yet discouraged) by the ways in which stories get this important work done. Just by discussing *Gilgamesh* and "A White Heron", we glimpse the long, long tradition of trees being integral to grappling with ethical questions surrounding how humans live on this shared planet. A tradition of 4,000 years of storytelling, at the very least.
- L It's only two sources, but it seems sufficient evidence to say that the map of arboreal poetics should include (or already does include) the category of ethics. More work needs to be done teaching stories that stir the questions one must ask if we have any hope of gaining wisdom in how to live on the planet.
- M So, we have the following five categories as a starting point of arboreal poetics.
One: arboreal poetics recognises and explores how trees infuse the literary and cultural imagination, the world over.
Two: it recognises and explores *arboreal poiesis*, that is, the fact that trees are always already in a process of making. They are makers, individually and yet collectively across Deep Time. Like all life, an interpretive agency from the cell all the way up is something that makes poiesis possible. As makers, they also make and respond to innumerable chemical signatures. This is a kind of knowingness.
- L And three:
Arboreal poetics recognises and explores intra- and interspecies interactions that spur "ontological and semiotic innovation" to extend Haraway's focus on when and where animals meet. This could be the language of a human writer responding to the presence of a tree. This could also be a tree initiating and sustaining a symbiotic relationship with another species, such as an ant, within a forest.
- M And on an even deeper level - four: arboreal poetics recognises and explores how bifurcation is a law of the cosmos. Trees bifurcate. So does human thought within human language. Fern-like dendritic snow crystals bifurcate, and so does any turbulent liquid or gas. Trees are by no means the first manifestation of bifurcation within the cosmos, but because of their sublimity and grandeur - and because of the way they infuse the cultural imagination - they are a powerful way to foreground the

deep kinship between human language, trees, and cosmological forces driving bifurcation.

- L And finally, five: even if someone has never climbed a tree, we can see trees as the great *main-masts to the voyaging earth*. They provide a place to reflect, to ponder. They grant an opportunity to revisit, to develop, to revise, and to refine an environmental ethic – an ethic that sees, as self-evident and as a grounding philosophical principle, the sacredness of a tree, of a forest, and of the Earth. From this starting point, we can further refine the ethics surrounding when and how to make a door.
- M The five categories are definitely a start, but you know that I prefer the messiness of dialogue over the drawing of lines necessary to make categories.
- L We need both, and the lines drawn are simply a start. Perhaps we should add the fact that when anyone carves something, or whittles, or spins wood on a lathe into a bowl – that such an act falls within arboreal poetics. The making of something out of wood.
- M Most definitely. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael discusses the art of “whales in paint; in teeth; in wood; in sheet-iron; in stone; in mountains; in stars” (2004, 377).
- L The *whales in wood* represents a merging of an arboreal poiesis and zoopoiesis.
- M And in circling back to Melville, I have a thought. This discussion of bifurcation and poiesis is making me see sentences in a whole different light.
- L How so?
- M Well, as I think about my time as an arborist, climbing trees, pruning trees, and this discussion on sentences, I think we can push things further.
- L Keep going.
- M There are times when I still go and climb an old tree just to exist within the canopy. Is that not what happens when we diagram a sentence? I have students diagram sentences. One class became quite obsessed. We read and studied a 134 word sentence on Ahab’s torment, and *they* wanted to diagram it.¹² I’ll

¹² The sentence reads, “Often, when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of frensies, and whirled them round and round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire” (2004, 285-6).

mention, though, that they did not want to diagram the sentence in the chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale” which continues for nearly two pages.

- L One day, they might.
- M Perhaps. I just want to make it clear that a sentence exhibits an *arboreal poiesis* regardless of the content. Melville’s sentences branch and bifurcate in the most wild patterns. I am beginning to look at – and also experience – how each sentence is its own tree. With some sentences, one can climb and hang out in the canopy for a long time. Others, not so much.
- L I like that. It’s as if you see Melville writing old-growth sentences...
- M ... growing from his old-growth mind.
- L And I have a final thought as well.
- M What’s that?
- L Well, we have been discussing bifurcation as a habit of the cosmos. In *The Whole Creature*, Wheeler aims to demonstrate the “habituation of semiosis in the history of the cosmos” (2009, 123).
- M What’s difficult for me to see, though, is how one could find evidence of a kind of *semiosis* in the elements. Cells have DNA, but molecular structures seem governed by forces, not signs.
- L True, but this is the crux. If indeed there is an habituation of bifurcation across the *history of the cosmos*, what is it that prompts the split? What is it that drives a seedling to split toward branches? Or, as I hinted at earlier in this discussion, what drives a river to branch into a delta, or an artery to branch into capillaries?
- M ... or an idea to branch into chapter, paragraph, sentence, word, or sound?
- L Exactly. And what drives the dendritic tendrils of the Mandelbrot set toward infinitesimal bifurcations? I know we have put much thought into protean energy being the source of such a leap – you more so than I – but I think protean energy eclipsed what is prior.
- M You think you have found a better way of thinking about the original energy of poiesis?
- L I think so, perhaps.
- M Well what is it?
- L In one word, Eros. In a couple of words, well, the Greeks saw Eros as one of the primary, necessary forces of the cosmos that is at the *beginning* of everything, and I don’t think Hesiod was wrong...

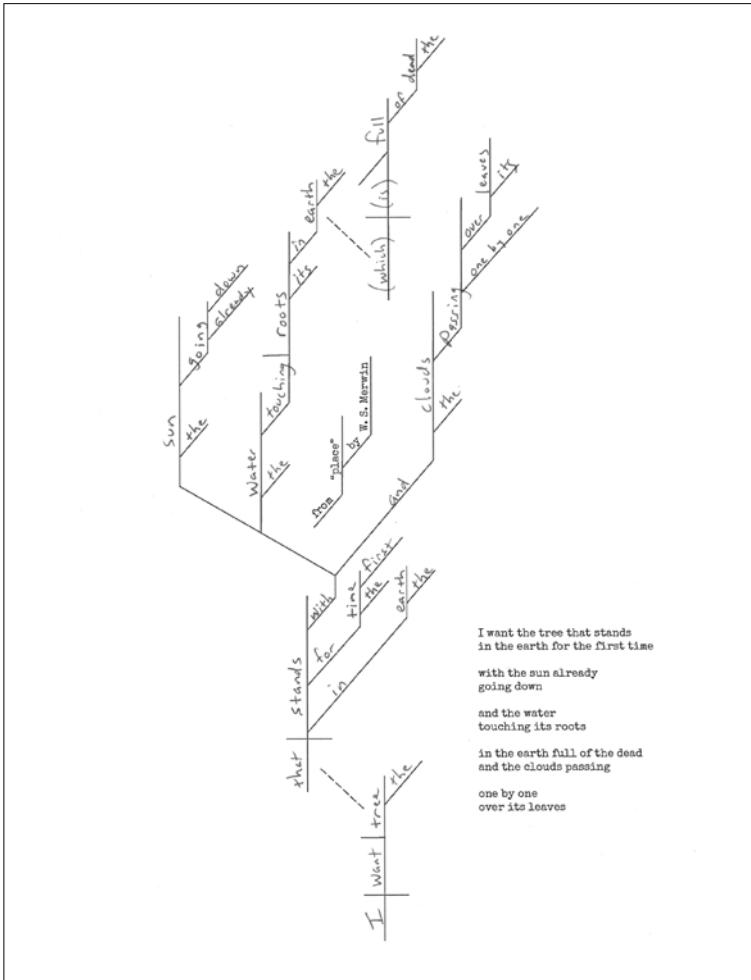


Figure 1 Diagramming a sentence from Merwin’s “Place” readily foregrounds the branching, bifurcating, dendritic energy of thought; such a demonstration suggests a deep kinship between thought and the energy that brings forth the form of a tree

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Life Writing as Plant-Writing: Arboreal Encounters in Kallen Pokkudan's *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham*

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Abstract Kallen Pokkudan, known as the 'mangrove man' of Kerala, devoted his life to the restoration of mangrove forests across the state. Pokkudan's autobiography, *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002), is as much a life narrative of the mangrove habitats in the Kannur district of Kerala as it is of the Dalit Pulaya community to which he belongs. Reading Pokkudan's arboreal activism in the light of recent critical approaches to vegetality, we argue that his autobiography can be read as an instance of 'Phytography' (Ryan 2020) or plant-writing, where the very act of writing the self evolves into writing with and listening to vegetal subjects.

Keywords Life writing. Plant writing. Mangroves. Phytography. Kallen Pokkudan.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Liminal Centrality of Mangrove Forests. – 3 Thinking-with-the 'Mad Mangrove'. – 4 Life Writing as Plant-Writing. – 5 Plant-Writing as Advocacy.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published

Open access

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Citation Venugopal, V.; Rangarajan, S. (2022). "Life Writing as Plant-Writing: Arboreal Encounters in Kallen Pokkudan's *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002)". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 239-252.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/004

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1 Introduction

“All I have planted and tended to are the mad mangroves” (Pokkudan 2002, 62). This confession epitomises the life work of Kallen Pokkudan, a Dalit humanist and environmentalist whose autobiography *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) or ‘My Life Among the Mangrove Forests’ is as much a life narrative of the mangrove habitats in the Kannur district of Kerala as it is of the subaltern community. Born into a family of agricultural labourers belonging to the Dalit *Pulaya*¹ caste in Kerala, Kallen Pokkudan devoted his life to the restoration of mangrove forests, planting thousands of saplings along the banks of the Pazhayangadi River in the Kannur district. This twinning of human life histories with vegetal histories in Pokkudan’s autobiography contributes to a unique repository of ecological wisdom and nature care. Mangroves are halophytes or salt-tolerant evergreen forests that thrive in extremely inhospitable conditions due to their high adaptability and complex salt filtration and root system. Mangroves are extraordinary ecosystems, providing many goods and services to humans, particularly fisheries, forest products, pollution abatement, and coastal protection against natural calamities (Sandilyan, Kathiresan 2012, 3524). The Indian mangroves alone support more than four thousand species, some of which face the threat of extinction. Mangrove forests in Kerala, the southernmost state of India, face an alarming erasure due to a number of factors ranging from undue extraction of raw materials, mining, land reclamation for agriculture, aquaculture, and housing. The state’s 700 km² mangrove cover has shrunk to a mere 17 km², thereby earning itself a ‘threatened’ status in Kerala (Basha quoted in Muraleedharan et al. 2009, 8). The decline also points to a gradual erasure of the traditional way of life of the Mangrove dwellers who harvested the land, sea, and inter-tidal zones to carry on with subsistence farming and fishing. The rampant commercialism which replaced this way of life was responsible for the loss of biodiversity in the State, known by the sobriquet, ‘God’s Own Country’. However, the Kannur district of Kerala was left with 45% of wetland cover due to the efforts of a lone eco-warrior, Kallen Pokkudan, who tirelessly collected and planted mangrove seeds and saplings. Propelled by the realisation that the socio-economic health of the local communities depended on the estuarine ecology and its mangrove habitats, Pokkudan created mangrove walls along the beaches of the Kannur district of Kerala to prevent sea erosion-related issues. However, the large-scale environmental value of Pokkudan’s efforts received attention only when

¹ *Pulaya* is a caste group found in South India. They have been designated as Scheduled Caste in Kerala, owing to their disadvantaged socio-economic status.

a tsunami hit South Asian countries in 2004. The severity of destruction was most evident in coastal ecosystems where mangrove forests had been destroyed due to anthropogenic activities. Pokkudan's autobiography talks about relationships that transcend the human focus by highlighting the imbrication of human survival and sustenance with the health and protection of mangrove ecosystems and the human need to be 'enchanted' by nature. As Pokkudan describes this poetics of symbiosis, "I began by planting 300 mangrove plants [...] to prevent the sea from eroding the coast and to shield the children walking to the school from the gusts of wind. And to soak in their beauty when they grew up" (Lal 2014).

The publication of *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* signalled a paradigmatic shift within the genre of Dalit life writing in Malayalam, indicating a nuanced articulation of what Mukul Sharma describes as "Dalit eco-narrations of the self"; the autobiographical expression of "an environmental space that is interwoven with a politics of survival and struggle" (Sharma 2019, 1013, 1018). It is also possible to read Pokkudan's autobiography as an experimental mode of life-writing that replaces the subaltern subject in relation to the surrounding *oikos* constituted by the mangrove forest and its unique ecology. Reading Pokkudan's arboreal encounters in the light of recent critical approaches to vegetality, we argue that *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* situates Dalit eco-experience alongside a parallel phytophilic narrative, thus constituting a new genre of plant-writing. Pokkudan's autobiography can be read as an instance of "Phytography" (Ryan 2020) or plant-writing, where the very act of writing the self evolves into writing *with* and listening to vegetal subjects. Here, the autobiographical narrative reveals its subtext as "more-than-human life writing composed in dialogue with living plants" (99). Additionally, phytography also takes on the crucial task of environmental advocacy by narrativising human vegetal intersectionality and cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility towards vegetal life.

The emergence of the autobiographical self in the European worldview was shaped by the Cartesian notion of an autonomous individual who "conquers the chaos of the external environment, including the community and nature" and is distinguished by his independence from the larger natural world (Ross-Bryant 1997, 85). This conception of a 'metaphysical self' remained alien to those at the margins of humanity - the oppressed, women, people of colour, and minorities. Subaltern life narratives depicting collective experiences of marginalised communities exhibit the development of a relational self that welcomes multiplicity and interdependency. However, the influence of the non-human environment on the autobiographer in reimagining selfhood has often been overlooked, accentuating the divide between the authorial self and the natural world. Pokkudan's life nar-

rative bridges this gap by centring the act of self-writing around environmental stewardship and ecopedagogical activism. The text illustrates that the 'self/setting' binary in life narratives can be eliminated by situating the self within the *oikos*, which signifies the idea of a larger home that consists of human and other-than-human actors. This emplacement establishes a continuum between the *oikeion* (traditionally associated with women, nature, and subalterns) and the *politikon* or the public sphere (Varma, Rangarajan 2018, xxii). In other words, Pokkudan's 'subaltern oiko-autobiography' reimagines the 'I' in life writing as an "emplaced subjectivity" as opposed to an "enclosed self" (xxx).

Dalit life writing has emerged as a distinctive genre in regional Indian languages as well as in English since the '90s. The Marathi term *Dalit*, which can be translated with 'crushed' or 'broken into pieces', was considered subversive in acknowledging the historical oppression of the erstwhile untouchable communities in a caste-ridden Indian society. Dalit life writing developed as a narrative practice that privileges the self and bestows agency to the hitherto 'invisibilised' Dalit subject. The resistance to caste hegemony through self-mediated articulations of trauma, atrocity, and exclusion can be seen as "an integral part of continuing contest within Indian democracy over the role of caste and its visibility/invisibility in the public sphere" (Ganguly 2009, 431). Despite the existence of a collective Dalit oral tradition in the form of folk songs and stories that depicted experiences of an agrarian society, the invisibilisation of Dalit presences was prevalent in early Malayalam literature (Dasan et al. 2012, xxvi, xxviii). The Dalit-Adivasi turn in Malayalam life writing tradition came much later, with the publication of works like *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Jeevithakatha* (2002), which was translated into English as *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004) and *Mayilamma: Oru Jeevitham* (2006), which was later translated into English as *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018) to name a few. Janu's and Mayilamma's autobiographies were crucial in reinscribing the eco-political resistance of the subaltern woman in Kerala's social sphere; the former illuminated the Adivasi leader's struggle demanding land distribution to tribals in Kerala, while the latter documented the story of a tribal woman's fight against the groundwater depletion caused by the multi-national giant Coca-Cola in Plachimada. The publication of Kallen Pokkudan's life narrative, along with these texts, was central to the formation of a new counter-canon at the beginning of the twenty-first century, wherein activist autobiographies of subaltern lives uncovered the inextricable link between the struggle for autonomy over land and natural resources and the question of environmental justice. The lack of a single authorial self and the emphasis on *Pulaya* lived experiences in Pokkudan's life narrative have urged critics to read his autobiography as an auto-eth-

nography from the margins (Kuriakose, Mishra 2021). In the opening chapter of the book, Pokkudan contemplates: “[d]oes a *pulaya* have biography? (Pokkudan 2002, 25), echoing the continuing contestations over authorship and agency and prompting the attendant question – does a mangrove swamp have a biography? While *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) places his political struggles on par with his eco-activism, his other life narratives like *Ente Jeevitam* (My Life) (2010) and *Pokkudan Ezhuthatha Aathmakatha* (The Unwritten Autobiography of Pokkudan) (2003) demonstrate how the plurality of experiences can be negotiated in fashioning multiple autobiographical selves. An anthology of essays titled *Kallen Pokkudan: Karuppu, Chuvappu, Pacha* (Kallen Pokkudan: Black, Red, and Green) (2013) edited by K.P Ravi and P. Anandan takes on the task of critically engaging with his life writing (the black, red and green colours signifying Dalit, leftist and green perspectives respectively) and points to the continuing relevance of his life and activism to contemporary times.

Pokkudan’s green activism as well as the text’s environmentality have been critiqued for the lack of focus on its emancipatory politics. For instance, Ranjith Thankkapan argues that the Malayalam word *pacha* (green) and the phrase *pacha manushyan* (raw human being) that is used by the publishers to describe Pokkudan, along with “[a] green cover page, with the photograph of the bespectacled Pokkudan, his half naked-body submerged in the mangroves” reinforces the notion that subaltern communities like the Dalits and the Adivasis are inherently closer to nature (208). He adds: “Pokkudan’s caste and caste occupation is objectified, and fixed symbolically on the *Kandal* (mangrove)” (Thankappan 2015, 209). However, such reading tends to overlook the manner in which the text construes historical linkages between caste, landscape, and natural resources. The metaphor of the mangrove functions a green strand in the narrative, weaving together the material embeddedness of Pokkudan’s experiences with a biophilic affinity for the natural realm; a signifier of the imbrication of social history with the deep, natural history of the region and an allusion to trans-species empathy. In other words, the mangrove metaphor does not undermine Pokkudan’s continuing resistance to being considered subhuman or ‘less-than-human’. Pointing to the history of dehumanisation of Dalits within the hierarchical caste order in Indian society, Pokkudan recounts how the *pulayas* in Kerala were denied ‘humanness’; they were forbidden from using the ‘proper’, dignified names reserved for the upper castes, and instead were named after animals, birds, and worms, relegating them to the status of critters occupying the lower rungs of life (Pokkudan 2002, 36). Upending this logic of dehumanisation where the subaltern is inadvertently likened to *animalia* or the non-human, Pokkudan reflects on the paradigm shifting perspectives that are likely to emerge in the caste-ridden mainstream Indian society, when the Dalit vernacular

in life narratives reclaim its embeddedness in the *oikos*; when language acquires the scent of *pacha mannu* (the bare soil), *pacha meen* (raw fish) and *puthu nellu* (the yield of rice after a harvest) (27). Pokkudan's oiko-autobiography subverts discursive dehumanisation by upholding the practice of writing *with* mangroves – situating self-narration as constituted by writing about the intricate web of life that comprises the swampy mangrove forests.

2 The Liminal Centrality of Mangrove Forests

Dubbed as carbon sinks or 'blue carbon', mangroves play an important role in contemporary Anthropocene climate change mitigation discourses. However, mangroves have been accorded negative valence despite the vital role they play in providing ecosystem services like flood and erosion control, carbon storage, shoreline protection, groundwater recharging, nutrient recycling, and microclimate regulation. Mangrove swamps have been historically perceived within our dominant cultural imaginary as unproductive spaces, habitats of dangerous animals, and vectors of disease. The ecological sublime is not associated with these liminal scapes because the mangroves call for a deeper understanding of our affective engagement with the greater-than-human. The constitutive entanglements of the mangrove swamps "don't inspire awe and wonder [...] In many parts of the world, they've long been frowned upon as dirty, mosquito-infested tangles of roots that stand in the way of an ocean view" (Kolb 2016). According to William Howarth, ecotones like swamps are characterised by the continuum between land and water and therefore inspire divided values like uncertainty and change. Human antagonism towards these 'hybrid' and 'multivalent' aqua-terra scapes is also fuelled by the prejudice that they "provide little basis for a life beyond subsistence" (Howarth 1999, 520-1). This perceived lack of usefulness has been a significant reason for the violence perpetuated on them by humans.

Anna Tsing draws attention to how the 'anthropo' as a qualifying prefix often falls short in imagining the Anthropocene, as it fails to trace the roots of our current ecological crises to exploitative socio-economic systems, rather than to 'humanity' as an unspecified whole, thereby "block[ing] attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and non-humans: the very stuff of collaborative survival" (Tsing 2015, 20). In a similar vein, Escobar emphasises the "relational ontology" of the mangrove world, a world of quantum connections in a state of perpetual "becoming" and critiques

the conversion of everything that exists in the mangrove-world into 'nature' and 'nature' into 'resources'; the effacing of the life-en-

abling materiality of the entire domains of the inorganic and the non-human, and its treatment as ‘objects’ to be had, destroyed, or extracted; and linking the forest worlds so transformed to ‘world markets’ for profit. (Escobar 2018, 18-19)

Doing so, he emphasises the need for multiple transition narratives and forms of activism in the Global South as well as the Global North and alternative paradigms emerging from “intellectuals with significant connections to environmental and cultural struggles” (24). A striking example of this transitional discourse is the emergence of a vibrant socio-cultural movement called *movement mangue* (the mangrove movement) that emerged in the mid-’90s in the Brazilian city of Recife. The movement, named after the mangrove swamps on which the city was built, was a politico-cultural renaissance of sorts that had ramifications in the fields of art, literature, culture, and music. The movement also focused on an inclusive vision of ecological and social justice emphasising the point that mangroves are “life-places” – “a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries” with an “ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities” (Thayer 2003, 3).

3 Thinking-with-the ‘Mad Mangrove’

Mangroves are complex borderline beings. As rhizophores with a unique rooting system that is above the ground level, they mediate the land and the sea (from the Greek *rhizaporos*, meaning ‘carry roots’ or ‘stilt roots’). Kallen Pokkudan’s life narrative is the story of an engagement with the idea of flourishing – of both human as well as greater-than-human life – what Arne Naess refers to as the “relational total field” (Naess 1973, 95). The tidal world of the mangroves has many actors deeply entangled in food chains and symbiotic life processes connecting humans with worms, crustaceans, algae, molluscs, snails, fishes, and crabs. For Pokkudan’s marginalised *Pulaya* community, survival was predicated on its emplacement in the mangrove’s ecosystem since it provided them with food, fuel, and medicine. Pokkudan recalls that when rice, the staple food of the community, was not available, they would sustain themselves from the different kinds of food that the wetlands provided in abundance, like fish, berries, and tubers. The migratory birds that frequented the mangroves were also the beneficiaries of the wetlands’ generosity. This relational *oikos* in which the “fish, the birds and the human beings depended on the mangroves” is at the heart of Pokkudan’s ecocentric vision (Surendranath 2002). Pokkudan’s life narrative is thus more about the *oikos* than the *autos*. He weaves in detailed descriptions of twenty kinds of mangroves and the birds, insects, and fish varieties that depend on

them for homing spaces. Pokkudan's autos is what deep ecologist Arne Naess would call a "large comprehensive Self (with a capital 'S') that embraces all the life forms on the planet" (Naess 1986, 80). This concept of selfhood is an inclusive one that recognises the planetary citizenship of all life forms. As Pokkudan explains, "[t]he birds that roam the skies and nest in mangrove branches, tree heads, paddy fields and river banks also have a life similar to ours" (2002).²

Caribbean scholar and poet Édouard Glissant, in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1990), elaborates on the idea of 'thinking-with-the rhizome' model of Deleuze and Guattari to capture the complex linkages and interconnections that traverse social and ecological worlds. Thinking-with-the-mangrove points to the complex space of inter-being shared by humans and the non-human world and paves the way for ethical alliances and ways of being in the world. Glissant makes a conceptual move from the land-bound fixity of the rhizome to the boundary-defying mangrove, thereby linking it to Caribbean history, trauma, and memory. Thinking-with-the mangrove also links to the slow violence of colonialism and its far-reaching after effects. In Pokkudan's narrative, the mangrove serves as a material and metaphorical image of the 'environmentalism of the poor' doubly disadvantaged by caste, inequality, and poverty. Pokkudan embraces the 'dark ecology' of his hometown, Pazhayangadi, an area ravaged by deep mining activities in the vicinity that caused nutrient runoff, shoreline erosion and water pollution, resulting in the disruption of the ecological functions of the wetlands and destruction of the microhabitats that support various life forms.

Chapter fourteen of the narrative describes a typical day in Pokkudan's mangrove life, a routine fraught with seemingly quotidian activities that are performed conscientiously with a keen sense of environmental responsibility. He would set out in the morning searching for mangrove seeds in a small boat armed with a bottle of drinking water and gruel – a search that would continue till the evening. He says:

One has to enter the jungle of adventitious aerial roots that extend into the waterways in order to hunt for the seeds. While undertaking this journey, one encounters the refuse dumped by the city- syringes, needles, and other plastic waste, the rotting refuse tossed in by the meat shops, and other impurities. The river has become a dumping ground for all kinds of waste. Many of the fish in the river are affected and die every day. As a result of all this, good seeds are also becoming hard to find. (2002, 62)³

² http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-acteurs-337_fr.html.

³ All quotations from *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) have been translated from Malayalam by the Authors unless otherwise noted.

Thus, Pokkudan's quest for mangrove seeds also interweaves a stark portrayal of the environmental degradation in the habitat. In the early days, thinking-with-the mangrove brought him a lot of negative criticism as well as threats from local real estate gangs who were trying to commercialise the mangrove habitats. However, this did not deter Pokkudan from planting more than 50,000 saplings in Kannur and other districts and caring for them till they grew into dense mangrove forests.

Pokkudan's life narrative describes a selfhood that has been deepened and enlarged by acting on behalf of the mangrove swamps. Reflecting on the ridicule and criticism he had to face regarding his mangrove activism, Pokkudan writes,

I heard a few educated people mock me saying, 'Poor fellow! He has lost his balance'. They are right. This is a state of imbalance. But I like it. It is a pleasurable state of madness. Sometimes it occurs to me that I am a mad mangrove myself. (64)

When the circles of self-identification are widened, the ethic of care for nature becomes a spontaneous act of joy. As the Australian rainforest activist John Seed describes, this process marks an evolution from performing environmental activism as an act of self-preservation ("I am protecting the rainforest") to an activism that recognises the self as relational ("I am part of the rainforest protecting myself") (3). Pokkudan's identification with the 'mad mangrove' is about this process of relational thinking, where the protection of the mangroves becomes the protection of the self.

4 Life Writing as Plant-Writing

In recent times, explorations of environmentality in life narratives have revealed how they can operate as effective media for conveying ecological concerns and environmental activism (Hornung 2019, 236). Ecological life writing examines the capacity of eco-biography, eco-memoir, and eco-autobiography to bear witness in an era of mass species extinction of anthropogenic climate change (Hughes-d'Aeth 2020, 183). Thus, as opposed to the conventional depiction of an individual person of significance in humanist life narratives, ecological life writing extends the ethics of recognition of the material presence of other-than-human life (White, Whitlock 2020, 3). Reconceptualising the autobiographical pact as a 'zoetrophic pact', Cynthia Huff argues that expanding the scope of the *bio* to include *zoe* - life that has generally been deemed insignificant and killable - transforms our understanding of what constitutes life, the way in which it is narrated and what life matters (Huff 2019, 445-6). The very notion of 'pact'

suggests the multiplicity of its constituent members, a form of multispecies flourishing that is narrated not just through writing, but through all of our senses. Huff argues that, by replacing the narrative emphasis on the human, zoetropic pack creates a scenario that

troubles the autobiographical pact's alliance between the reader, author and editor; eschews the human as principal actant in favour of distributive agency between the animal, the machine, inanimate matter, and the human while also promoting multispecies flourishing; advances a material becoming-with; advocates representationality that nudges us into the open as a zone of play; and suggests a strategy of multispecies reading and response-ability that pushes the audience to become-with other species not just by, or primarily by, relying on sight, but across sensoria. (454)

Decentering the humanist portraits in autobiography that exclude our vegetal kin, John Ryan coins the term "phytography", referring to life writing about more-than-humans that "pivots on the potential of collaborating and co-authoring narratives with plants" (2020, 98). This form of plant-writing foregrounds vegetal life and our relationship to them, as opposed to the sole focus on the autonomous, individual human self in conventional life narratives. Ryan also lists some of the major characteristics of a phytographic work which include particularisation, percipience, corporeality, temporality and seasonality, emplacement, language and signification, historicity, and mortality (99).

Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham exists at the intersections of portraiture of marginalised lives, eco-biography and phytography. This evinces a sense of liminality, where writing *about* the mangrove forests evolves into a process of writing *with* them, where the 'human' can no longer stand apart and becomes enmeshed with the vegetal. Pokkudan's arboreal encounters in the wetlands can be considered as an instance where enmeshment in an intricate web of life composed by the human, the other-than-human, and the more-than-human becomes apparent. Pokkudan's phytophilia does not emanate from perceiving nature as a pristine wilderness 'out there', but from embodied experiences that are in turn shaped by his community's history. The text particularises vegetality, engaging in attentive observation and description of individual plant characters. This is especially visible when Pokkudan describes the *pranthan kandal*, or the 'mad mangrove', scientifically known as the *Rhizophora Mucronata*. Enamoured by the plant, Pokkudan declares his wish to be known as its namesake. "I am a mad mangrove", he says (2002, 64). Here, the 'mad' mangrove becomes operative as the literal translation of the Malayalam *pranthan kandal* (the word *pranthan* in Malayalam means 'mad man') and a metaphorical allusion to the years of

public ridicule Pokkudan experienced as the ‘mad man’ who wanted to save swamplands. Later, he also states that he wholeheartedly welcomes the epithet *kandal* (mangrove) that remains attached to his name, expressing his desire to be known as “*Kandal Pokkudan*” (65). He perceives the mangrove trees as agentic and responsive, acknowledging their role in shaping the ecological and social history of the region. Describing the life cycle of the *murū*, a type of oyster that grows attached to the rocky reefs in the lagoon, Pokkudan says that even the shellfish is a creature, just like the mangrove (62). This analogy between plant and animal life subverts our dominant zoocentric paradigm that holds human/animal life as the standard against which vegetal life is measured. Pokkudan holds the mangrove tree to be a percipient, animate creature, and his linguistic register does not resort to the prevalent practice of zoologising plants to legitimize their vivacity. The fifteenth chapter of his autobiography is titled *Kandal Jeevitham*, which translates literally into ‘mangrove-life’, or ‘life amidst the mangroves’. Situating himself at the centre of its rhizomorphic arboreality, Pokkudan says that, for him, life is nothing but whatever green remains of the mangrove forests, the stench of its swamplands and the salty breeze that blows from the estuary (66). In this way, the corporeal presence of the mangrove forests co-constitutes Pokkudan’s selfhood and its articulation through an idiosyncratic phytological register.

Paying close attention to the temporality and seasonality of this treescape, Pokkudan catalogues various ways to care for the young saplings; as they grow and bloom in the month of May, the hanging seeds look like they have been adorned with small brownish hats (62). The phytographic poetics of the text is also shaped by its emphasis on emplacement, or the influence of *topos* and its particularities on plant being. Pokkudan uses the term *theerakkadukal*, which can be translated as ‘littoral forestscapes’ to describe the mangrove forests, thus revealing their interstitial existence; an ambiguous arboreality that roots itself between the *terra* and the *aqua*. Another important feature of phytography is the concern with the mortality of vegetal life, the “decline and demise of plants operating as meaningful events prompting human grief, memorialization and elegy” (Ryan 2020, 99). Pokkudan, who spent his life planting and tending to thousands of mangrove saplings, mourns the loss of around 5,000 saplings destroyed by those who deemed his activism to be antithetical to the ideas of development (2002, 64). Driven by an ethics of care that transgresses species boundaries, Pokkudan grieves the loss of species as it unfolds before him, a solastalgic mourning that reminds the readers that, if the current unfettered mode of development continues, clean drinking water, along with crabs, shrimps and other aquatic species will become a memory (68). Thus, Pokkudan’s life narrative can be read as a phytographic account composed in di-

alogue with the mangrove forests, signalling “a shift from a homogeneous view based on taxonomic order to heterogeneous view based on empathic regard for individual plants as subjects” (Ryan 2020, 101).

5 Plant-Writing as Advocacy

In the year 2014, a massive oil spill in the Sela River in Bangladesh, brought about by a collision between an oil tanker and a cargo ship, covered the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans mangrove forest in black tar, causing massive fish kills. In the context of this disaster, a few portions from *The Honey Hunter* (2014), an illustrated children's narrative set in the Sundarbans, was reworked by the author Kartika Nair and artist Joëlle Jolivet with the aim of portraying the devastating effect of the oil spill on the landscape and the people. They covered the original sketches of the mangrove forest in black to represent how the tar was suffocating the ecosystem and the original story was rewritten to show how the oil spill had affected the ecologically sensitive region. This campaign demonstrated one of the ways in which narrative advocacy could contribute to inculcating awareness about the crucial role this fragile ecosystem plays in protecting biodiversity.

One of the central tenets of phytography is its emphasis on environmental advocacy. By critiquing reductive accounts of plants, narrativising human vegetal intersectionality, and cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility towards vegetal life, *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* takes on the urgent task of environmental advocacy. The autobiography, along with the debates its publication elicited, contributed immensely to the growing public awareness about the ecological significance of mangroves and their rampant destruction. Today, Kallen Pokkudan's name is synonymous with mangrove conservation, and he is often described as the ‘Mangrove Man’ of Kerala. Much like his name, *Kandal Pokkudan* (Mangrove Pokkudan), his public persona has come to be inseparably connected with mangroves. He received several accolades for his conservation efforts, including a special mention from UNESCO and the Kerala state department's Vanamithra award. He also started a mangrove school to enlighten the young generation about the importance of mangrove forests and conducted more than five hundred lectures on the importance of conserving wetlands in educational institutions all over India. His autobiography has also been included as a part of the curriculum in several universities. Recently, a new species of Cyperaceae found in Kannur district of Kerala was named *Fimbristylis pokkudaniana*, honouring his legacy (Sunil et al. 2017, 21). Thus, Pokkudan's phytographic life writing operates as an ecopedagogical advocacy narrative in Kerala's public sphere, owing to its emphasis on environ-

mental praxis and the acknowledgement of the confluence of social, ecological and interspecies justice (Gaard 2008, 326).

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Buket Uzuner's *Fire* and Sacred Trees An Interview and Impressions

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Abstract Buket Uzuner's construction of iconography of nature, especially her integration of arboreal bodies in her novels, reveals anxiety mixed with the sense of accountability and responsibility she feels as we all face climate change. This work contains the interview that we conducted with Uzuner and an exploration of her conceptualisation of arboreal complexities in the age of climate change, especially discussing her upcoming work *Fire*. Our interpretation is informed by Paul Ricoeur, who approached different levels of hermeneutic adaptation by giving weight to both the transparency and opaqueness of the meaning of icons and metaphors.

Keywords Buket Uzuner. Fire. Arboreal ecocriticism. Eco-shamanism. Climate crisis.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-11-17
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Batur, P.; Özdağ, U. (2022). "Buket Uzuner's *Fire* and Sacred Trees: An Interview and Impressions". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 253-268.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/000

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The contemporary Turkish writer Buket Uzuner has become known for her creative works ranging from novels to travel notes, but especially for her four-volume book series, which brings together Turkish society, history, and the cultures of Anatolia to explore layers of myth, complexities of everyday life, and the problems of the Anthropocene and climate change. Uzuner's series, named after four elements of the Universe, *Water (Su)*, *Earth (Toprak)*, *Air (Hava)*, and *Fire (Ateş)*, encourages growing awareness of the Earth, reflecting myth and nature to bind the essence of the cosmos to human thought and action. As a novelist, Uzuner presents herself as an 'eco-shaman', accentuating three aspects shaping the shaman's role in society in her writings: acting as an intermediary, enabling connections; providing alternative knowledge and understanding of eco-wisdom; and advocating balance and harmony to restore peaceful coexistence with nature to guide future decisions (Batur, Özdağ 2019). Uzuner's construction of iconography of nature, especially her integration of arboreal bodies in her novels also reveals anxiety mixed with the sense of accountability and responsibility she feels as we all face climate change. We interviewed Uzuner for her conceptualisation of arboreal complexities in the age of climate change.

We remember how excited we were talking about her first work *Water (Su)*, when it was published in 2012 in Turkey. In the US the publication coincided with Hurricane Sandy, the largest hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic to that date. After the crushing landfall on New York City, Sandy's 160 km/h winds left behind more than 70,000 people stranded, and an astonishing 19 billion-dollars' worth of damages. A staggering 250,000 vehicles were destroyed as the waters rushed through the streets of Manhattan and the neighbouring boroughs. *Business Weekly's* cover declared: "It's Global Warming, Stupid!" (Hern 2012). Ufuk, who studies Aldo Leopold's work, remembers 2012 as the year of a bloodbath suffered by gray wolves after they were removed by the US Congress from the Endangered Species List in 2011. Seven hundred wolves were shot in the Rocky Mountains within months of this action (Morrell 2021). And here we were reading a book by Buket Uzuner in Istanbul, Turkey, bringing together the Anthropocene's global impact of climate change and extinction.

The publication in 2015 of the second book of Uzuner's series, *Earth (Toprak)* coincided with the Paris Climate Conference. COP 21, the UN climate negotiations, provided the background for 187 parties to set targets and new procedures to review emission reductions globally. Uzuner's *Earth* shows the reader the long shadow of history and myth in the lands of Anatolia. It is about "the cradles of civ-

We would like to thank The Susan Turner Fund of Vassar College for project support. We are grateful to Arda Korkmaz, Isaac Leslie, Danielle Falzon and John VanderLippe for their editorial suggestions.

ilization", and carrying the burden of the consequences of the past and present for the future of society and nature. The message resonates loud and clear to those who listen: act together to change everything for the better (United Nations 2022). Even though there is structural and societal apathy in comprehending or assessing risks and damages associated with climate change, the warning signs are all here: in 2015, wildfires burned a record 880,000 acres in California (Cal Fire 2015). The record lasted only three years, as California wildfires burned 1,975,000 acres in 2018 (Cal Fire 2018). The Atlantic saw record setting hurricane seasons one after another. In 2016 there were 15 named storms, and 11 hurricanes, a number surpassed the following year, with 17 named storms and 17 hurricanes in 2017. Then 2018 became one of the 'deadliest hurricane seasons' in recorded history due to the loss of life and the \$50 billion dollars in property damage caused by two major hurricanes.

Uzuner's third book *Air* (*Hava*), published in Turkish in 2018, came out as the media was teeming with articles about a dire warning by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2018). Recent scientific reports were linking climate change to the density, duration and destruction of extreme weather events, and the IPCC report indicated that the intensity of weather events everywhere will increase in the future. Clean power remained a dream in the face of ever-increasing gas and oil exploration, to feed the hunger for fossil fuel energy consumption and profits. Uzuner's book reflects this tension between what needs to be, and what is. By discussing the nuclear energy aspirations of Turkey in *Air*, Uzuner alerted us about hard and dangerous bargains rising in our future.

As much as her first three books inform, advise, and warn about the global ecological collapse, her last book of the series, *Fire* (*Ateş*), which Uzuner describes as the culmination of all of the others, promises to be about witnessing, and specifically, witnessing the climate crisis. Uzuner wrote *Fire* during the COVID pandemic, and when the world watched fires engulfing the Amazon, Australia, the US, and the shores of the Mediterranean and Aegean region. As old and new forests went up in wildfires in Anatolia, the other parts of the globe fought with drought, smoke, wildfires and floods. The summer of 2020 was a summer of fears and tears for Turkey, for neighbours and strangers alike watched uncontrollable fires burn the ancient forests covering the Taurus Mountains. The forests, which endured the history of the classic civilisations and the rise and fall of empires, burned for weeks stretching into months throughout the summer. These were the forests where we, as children, played and collected leaf samples for our classes, as our families picnicked and went into the shady interior to worship the cool forest air in the hot summer sun. In the summer of 2021, we understood yet again that fossil fuels were not staying in the engines in our cars, or just providing energy to industry,

but burning our trees, forests, our lungs, the future of our land, our inheritance from our ancestors and our promise to our children. We were in wild blazes and choking smoke in the Mediterranean coast to coast, from Turkey to Spain. In our interview, we were concerned with how Uzuner was viewing this intimate and revered relationship with the forest and the trees as we all dreaded what might happen again in the summer of 2022.

Terry Erwin and Janice Scott defined the term “arboreal ecosystem” to talk about vast and complex biodiversity and the balance of great complexity of the terrestrial environment created by trees (Erwin, Scott 1982; Cossio, Simonson 2020). We interviewed Uzuner to explore her approach and her interpretation of arboreal agency in this vast complexity. We had the devastating Anatolian fires of 2021 and her latest and upcoming book *Fire (Ates)* in our minds. For Uzuner, arboreal environments house fables and myths, whispering lessons of the past to the future. As a novelist and eco-shaman, Uzuner creates this connection to reach a common ground for a collective eco-wisdom. She renders that ideally the network of trees creates a seamless and balanced eco-continuity between humans and all arboreal entities, but also, she portrays the trees as standing alone to represent components of tension and conflict as well as harmony and balance. There is a strong prevalence of trees which are icons and metaphors as formulated by Turkish folklore and Anatolian myths, and perhaps their appearance in her works is not surprising. However, Uzuner challenges the reader by introducing further complications into this presentation. She creates complicated interactions to represent trees as bridges and catalysts between the mythical and the everyday realms. The connection enables her to retain her ultimate aim of being a future seeker as an eco-shaman.

Icons are representations integrated into the visual lexicon of everyday life and popular culture, such as trees representing blessings and fertility. While images tend to remain stable, metaphors, which give meaning to icons, can change over time and they can become points of contestation, like seeing trees and forests as obstacles to economic development versus valuing them as essential for a sustainable future. Paul Ricoeur approached different levels of hermeneutic adaptation by giving weight to both the transparency and opacity of the meaning of icons and metaphors. Ricoeur's “double intentionality” defines icons and metaphors as disparate elucidations of similar or seemingly similar images. The “double intentionality” becomes part of the formulation, transformation and redefinition of icons and metaphors (Ricoeur 1967; 1991). In this sense, the double intentionality of trees in Uzuner's writing is integrated into the internal and external landscapes, constantly making them both factual and mythical. Yet, examining the iconography of arboreal entities as they crop up in different sections of Uzuner's work reveals that be-

yond the “transparency” and “opaqueness” of their meaning which shapes the “double intentionality”, there is also a “tertiary” level of complexity (Batur, VanderLippe 2013). The “tertiary” level is about controlling icons as Uzuner serves as witness to the future. They morph to become the shaman’s porthole to the future, such as the “Tree of life” in her novels, or the olive trees as she depicts them in our conversation with her. This tertiary level of complexity does not take away from the representation of the fabric of nature, but rather introduces a fabric woven of cherished epics and the ancestral tales of the far-away lands and once-upon-a times, and together they become a way to reveal both the possibilities and the inevitable continuities leading to the future.

The “double intentionality” and the “tertiary” tension adds enhanced layers of meaning in Uzuner’s novels. In *Water* one of Uzuner’s main characters, Defne Kaman, was born as a bolt of lightning struck a beech tree, an ancestral tree of lineages. The tree shatters, yet it remains strong, conveying the challenges and the change the child is destined to bring to the family and the world (Uzuner 2012, 225-6). As Umay, Defne’s grandmother, explains, “[i]n Turkic mythology, every leaf on the ‘Tree of Life’ represents a living person and corresponds to our future life in the World beyond”. Yet, her granddaughter brought both strength and destruction to the ‘tree’ that was in the family’s garden. Defne, in Uzuner’s words, becomes “a misfit” but integral to a better future for the land and society. Defne is a “misfit”, who dares to dissent. She is the critic and enabler of change. In another context, Umay reflects that the Anatolians who protest the building of hydroelectric power plants today are “the grandchildren of the Tree of Life” whether they are aware of it or not. They have roots in the ancient soil (Uzuner 2012, 233). But those whose roots are young, those who support the building of the dam are also part of the same tree. In contrast to the protestors, they, without knowing, are sowing the seeds of destruction of the very earth. As an eco-shaman novelist, Uzuner displays probabilities for the future to present the possibilities in conflict today.

When we interviewed Uzuner the tension between the allegorical iconography of the arboreal entities was ever present. Our questions and her answers regarding the olive trees reveal our collective belief that destruction of olive groves signals destruction of the future, in contrast to economic arguments favouring the growth of mining in Turkey. While the olive tree embodies longevity, survival and continuity, the beech trees stand for family, lineages, and life. They mark the boundaries of the past and they stand to witness the future. Afterall, due to climate change the water is rising to claim their roots and wildfire is coming to burn their branches. John Burroughs told us that “the book of nature is like a page written over or printed up on with different-sized characters and in many different languages,

interlined and cross lined, with a great variety of marginal notes and references" (Burroughs 2008, 153). Uzuner's work represents arboreal collectivity with many facets, connecting present to myth, and myth to the future. She connects the icons and metaphors to generate an alternative inventory of meanings, but also to redefine the conflict and uncertainty embedded in the future. Uzuner's book of arboreal environments is full of marginal notes and references.

Seven years will have passed since COP 21, the UN climate negotiations at Paris, and the prospect of global carbon neutrality in 2050 still remains an elusive promise. When we talked about her upcoming work *Fire (Ateş)* with Uzuner, we kept referring back to the flames of 2021 that claimed beloved forests and trees. As Barry Lopez points out at the end of *Horizon* (Lopez 2019, 512),

what we say we know for sure changes every day, but no one can miss now the alarm in the air. Our question is what is out there, just beyond the end of the road, out beyond language and fervent belief, beyond whatever gods we've chosen to give our allegiance to?

We wanted to know Uzuner's approach and we started our conversation on Zoom, on a cold day in March 2022:

BUKET UZUNER I have a couple of things to point out at the very beginning of our conversation. Even though I work in literature, and storytelling is my way of life at this stage of my life, I come from a science background. Like many people in our generation, I didn't study social science, or mythology, but I studied science. In Turkey, the social sciences were seen as second class, irrelevant and irrational. This is how the Turkish education system prepared us to be scientists at the end of the 20th century. But as I learned from the characters in my novels: people change. I found out that water, earth, and air represent similar ideas in different realms, and I am inspired by mythologies now. I am studying them and learning from them. I find it interesting, but from the very beginning, thinking and writing about fire presented a challenge for me. What is the point of fire? Conflict, clash, and struggle are embedded within the symbol of fire. Depicting these struggles and conflicts - the multifaceted, conflictual yet complementary, and all together complex, aspects of *Fire* - is tearing me apart, and these aspects of fire are shaping my struggle with the narrative: fire is melting me! So, of course, I dedicated this novel to Prometheus. Prometheus epitomises humanity's struggle to obtain knowledge, even though it burns us continually. Fire is the way to understand mortality and immortality, our first claim to civilisation and humanity.

PINAR BATUR We are interested in the place of fire in Turkish mythology, as well as other mythologies. Japanese mythology also includes icons of water, earth, air, fire, but also one more element, and it is 'nothingness', the 'void'. The void embodies all the knowledge of what we know and what we don't know, creativity and mystery. We are wondering if you also find a place in your novels for such a concept?

B.U. 'Nothingness' (*hiçlik*) is an integral component of Turkish Mythology and Sufism, the Alevi-Bektashi tradition of Anatolian Turkish heritage. It appears as not an emptiness but a hole with a circle around it, like the number zero. It is a hole, there is an emptiness inside, but it still has a value, maybe even more than all other numbers! Mevlâna Celaleddin-i Rumi valued 'nothingness' and mentioned that eternal circle around the nothingness. This eternal circle is life circle, ecological circle; nothing will ever disappear forever. I myself discovered eternal continuity while writing *Fire*. 'Nothingness' is like fire, it has contradictory and complementary facets.

UFUK ÖZDAĞ You tell your readers that women should be the writers of history. You told us in *Air (Hava)* "if ever one day there will be a city founded by women, world history and fate, full of male destruction on the earth, may surely change" (2018, 46). We are wondering how a woman would write the history of nature. How does a woman write about nature?

B.U. First, let me point out how I enjoy these questions, asked by two women scholars to a woman writer. I don't believe that any male writer, or any male academic has ever asked a woman that question, but I have been asked this before! I think because it takes a woman to think about this. I'm very grateful that you ask how a woman writes about nature, because it is as essential as how women shape science, medicine, art, or literature. With your question, I think of Shahmaran, a mythical symbol depicted as a woman and snake combined in one body, and she represents knowledge of healing, recovery, and wisdom. It is up to us to see ourselves as daughters of Shahmaran, to carry this inheritance with us, and it is up to a female writer to write with these principles in sight. Because the image was seen as 'feminine', it became a symbol of intrigue and negative toxicity, instead of being what it is: the symbol of medicine. It is a symbol that promises life. Even a professor-turned-medical doctor drinks lemony mint tea to feel better, because his grandmother taught him to have it when he has a bad cold, whether they are a Turkish professor or an American one, here in Turkey, or the US. Because our mothers and grandmothers teach us fairy tales, lullabies, and mythologies as well as nature and nurture, we maintain our sensibilities about life, nature, and the world.

When we write about nature, we write about all women's experiences with it.

- U.Ö. In your writing you state that fire has a paradoxical role in the ancient Turkish belief system. What is the role of fire? Does it bring illumination or chaos?
- B.U. I am interested in how fire changes us, human beings, and how it changed our relationship with nature, what we want to learn and what we want to control. Heating, cooking, and having fire altered our minds and bodies. There was no invention of fire. Fire already existed because it is part of nature, and our history as humans became how we tried to control fire. Our first assumption regarding the control of fire enabled us to define the beginning of human civilisation. Of course, we can't live without water, soil, or air, but without fire, we might not have been able to think; we think, because we try to control fire.
- P.B. How does Turkish mythology influence our understanding of nature, especially of the forest and the trees? While I am asking this, I am thinking about how integral the symbol of the "Tree of Life" is to Turkish mythology, and how it is considered to connect earth, heaven, and hell together.
- B.U. The tree is precious! The other day, at Gönen, in the Marmara Sea region, they named two olive trees after "Umay" and "Defne", two main characters in my novels. The trees became the symbols of that region's commitment to protect olive trees. A relationship with a tree develops in a different sensibility: it is sacred. How to approach a tree becomes a challenge. For example, talking with a tree is the very essence of this challenge, because it is very difficult to interpret the conscience of a creature that isn't one's own kind yet is an integral part of our own being. We all come from nature. Dolphin, deer, eagle - the beings that I talk about in my books, *Water*, *Earth* and *Air* - all share something in common with all of us, as well as the next symbol I employ in *Fire*, the horse. We all live in nature as a part of its web. We are inheritors as well as interpreters of this web. The climate crisis destroys this web, as well as what led to this era, the Anthropocene, and we destroyed our own understanding, our own approach and the peaceful coexistence within this web. The wildfires were symbols of this separation.
- P.B. In Turkey, many think of olive trees as trees of life, spreading their roots and branches. Olives trees symbolise longevity. Protecting olive trees is a way of life, a way to protect life. In fact, since 1939, Turkey has championed laws protecting wild and cultivated olive groves. However, according to the recently updated laws, and since March 1st, 2022, olive groves are open for exploration and mining. What are your feelings about this?

B.U. Olives, figs, and grapes are integral to life in the Mediterranean. It is our obligation to future generations to protect them, but not only in the Mediterranean. I've been to Mardin, a city in the heart of Anatolia, and I was surprised to find out about the olive trees there. They call Mardin "the motherland of olives" because they believe that olives are the fruit of Mesopotamia. Goethe talks about olives in his *Italian Journey*. We must develop increased awareness in Turkey, even if it sometimes feels too late. All over the world, as Atatürk said, "the farmers and peasants are the masters of the nation". If a nation doesn't have food, the nation has nothing. If we lose our olive trees, we will lose our history and our future.

P.B. If you allow me, I would like to read a short passage from *Air*. You wrote "In the end, when it is time to move on from this world, only this remains to be seen: Did you plant a tree on this earth or did you uproot one? Did you stand for justice or close your eyes to injustice? Did you mend hearts or break them? Life is that plain and simple" (Uzuner 2018, 166). This passage reminded me how Aegean people respect olive groves: plant a tree for your children to enjoy its olives. Would you elaborate more on the centrality of trees in your world?

B.U. I started a novella called *The Woman Under the Olive Tree* which I'll finish after *Fire*. The olive tree is very symbolic in it. When I first started writing it, I was taking notes to develop my story when a group invited me to İzmir for an interview. Tunç Soyer Bey, who was the mayor of İzmir at the time, was also present at the interview. Tunç Bey wanted me to write my book under this very old tree: "I invite you to Seferihisar, where we have an 1,800-plus-year-old tree". Seferihisar is very close to İzmir, you know, and it was a pleasure to go there. Here I stood underneath the olive tree whose branches shaded ancient thinkers and philosophers. It's in the ancient city of Teos. Every year, they have an olive oil auction. Local folk line up chairs under this 1,800-year-old tree, and the olive oil is all bottled up on the table, a table covered in a white tablecloth, and the auction begins. On that day, they sold one type of oil for a record prize. I believe it came from the "Umay Tree". It is an olive oil auction, but it is also a celebration of the region, of its olives and life; they claim "this is our tree" as a part of the history and the future. It was amazing. The tree is 1,800 years old, and still alive! I went up to the tree - I just wanted to touch, kiss, and be close to it. Later, when I returned, I heard that they had decided to name the tree after one of the central characters of my book, the "Umay Nine (Grandma Umay)". So now the second olive tree in Gönen, which I talked about earlier, is the second "Umay". Of

course, I care deeply about the olive trees, and how they have stood for peace and merging of cultures for centuries.

U.Ö. You talk about beech trees in your novels. One of your chapters in *Water (Su)*, "The Beech Tree of Life", is a contemplative study of the sacredness of the beech tree in Turkish thought. In *Air (Hava)* you tell your readers that a family's lineage is traced through the branches of the beech tree, known as the "tree of life". Your main protagonist, Defne Kaman, was born as a bolt of lightning struck the beech tree in the garden. What are you hoping to convey to your readers with the image of the beech tree? What do beeches represent?

B.U. I talked about the beech trees in *Earth* - trees of heart, lineage, ancestry, and the home. Trees, all of them, are perhaps the greatest symbol of human life because they represent nature. In *Earth*, I talked about how beeches also represent a family, and their branches and roots support the tree of life. But as Turks, we have somehow begun to overlook this connection and unity. Even though we want equal rights for all, and equal wages for all, we also want to be the head of the organisations which embrace equality. It leads to the formation of factions and oppositions - and to what end? Having a title - like the head of something, or president of something else - hurts the unity and natural connections, and it fosters prejudice and discrimination, especially gender discrimination. If a woman is a rebel, that woman pays the price of being pushed out of the community. Even the simplest acts, like wearing lipstick or smoking in public, become divisive issues. There are generational gaps, but we are, deep down, one and the same; we come from the same branches and roots of the tree. We need to plant the tree of life with love, and we need to learn to embrace everyone and the changes and the differences that they are experiencing. We need to own our own prejudices, because I am human, and we belong to the same family. Writing about this is good for me, I learn as I write. I unite heart and justice within the branches of the tree.

P.B. Last year, in 2021, July and August were two of the hottest months on record. In these months alone, more than two hundred wildfires destroyed 1,700 km² of forest land in the Aegean and Mediterranean region of Turkey. Not only in Turkey - last summer, these fires burned stretches of land from Turkey to Greece to Italy to Spain. We all felt the pain. I kept wondering, how did witnessing this catastrophe influence you and your writing of *Fire*?

B.U. I suffered as if I was dying. The forest burned and animals died. Tell me how is this different from watching people die? Here we are celebrating March eighth, International Women's

Day in Turkey, and meanwhile we hear that women are being killed in increasing numbers. What's the difference? An animal, a tree, a woman, or a child: they all represent life. We've lost our sense of respect for life! Unfortunately, killing women in Turkey has reached epidemic proportions. So far this year, men have killed over 290 women, which puts Turkey on course to far exceed the over 300 hundred women killed by their fathers, lovers, husbands, and brothers in 2021. If half this number of men – husbands, fathers, brothers – were killed in a year in Turkey, all the Turkish parliamentary parties would come together and unanimously pass a law to prevent women from killing men in three days! But it is just in headlines and in the news. We only passively hear about them except when we live through one. Basically, we don't value women's lives in our country. We can change this by cherishing women's lives, and also by respecting life in Turkey. When I was invited to New Zealand to talk about my novel, *Gallipoli (Gallipoli: The Long White Cloud, 2013)*, the first thing I saw when I got off the plane is etched in my memory. There were posters hanging on poles, and stickers, everywhere. They had a picture of a young man, his mouth taped shut, announcing the men's march protesting women killings. The only example I can think of in Turkey is the protest of men in skirts in 2015. But, why is the skirt the symbol of women? It was a tragic, if hopeful sign of protest. One day, we will all need to march in protest of all acts that disrespect life, all murders, and all intentional forest fires. We need to teach men to respect life, to respect animals and forests, but also to start respecting their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. They all go to their mothers when they are in trouble, why not respect women?

U.Ö. Are you expecting yet another hot summer, marred by wildfires?

B.U. Yes, I am. I'm not saying it's going to be hotter this summer, but however it turns out, we need to be ready. We need to think about what we can do before the wildfires. We need more fire-fighting planes. We need to take other precautions, for example, to develop a healthy food system. We need to raise our own food sustainably in Turkey, and with climate change in sight, we need to build an integrated food system. In the '70s and '80s, as Turks, we used to brag that we would not go hungry if Turkish borders closed, because we had a healthy food system, built upon our "seven regions, embodying seven climates". Our soil is still healthy, even though we're still short of water. We need to take precautions, and we especially need to ask women to help with these resilience efforts. Women dominate agriculture, and also the vast majority of readers in Turkey are women. That's

why women matter so much. If they organise, they will pressure parties, mayors, governors. We need to strengthen the relationship between women, and we need to provide a platform to show their strength and unity, not just sitting behind their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. We need women leaders, even if they have different opinions. When I talk about my books or current issues, people with different opinions can come and listen to me. It means a lot to me because I think that's what democracy is like, because these fires are going to get worse. We want to take precautions. I want knowledge to spread like wildfire! Here I am thinking about Scott Slovic's *Going Away to Think* (2008).

P.B. Would you like to elaborate?

B.U. I like that Slovic gives weight to responsibility in the ecocritical approach. Slovic advises the writer to take ecocritical responsibility seriously, saying that literature is more than just making intellectual plays for intelligent but irresponsible critics. As he points out, literature is an area where human values and behaviours are explained, which means environmental and especially climate issues are also the responsibility of writers and literary critics.

P.B. In our work, we have described you as an eco-shaman, as an intellectual and novelist, leading your readers to environmental consciousness. We especially emphasised three components which we feel dominate your role in society and facilitate communication regarding 'eco-wisdom': making connections within the ecosystem, and its past, present and future; emphasizing 'eco-continuity', providing alternative knowledge and understanding about 'eco-coherence'; and advocating for balance to restore peaceful coexistence with nature as 'eco-harmony'.

B.U. Yes, I like that very much. That is why I thought of Slovic's approach.

P.B. So, I have to ask you a question for the future: what do you think we should do?

U.Ö. I would like to add to this question, by asking about your thoughts regarding the project on the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. It's become a global movement. I always think of the Green Belt that Wangari Maathai created in Africa: an astonishing number of millions of trees. I wonder if Turkey can start a Green Belt movement in our country in the ten years of UN Ecosystem Restoration. We have only nine years left.

B.U. I will be the moderator next week at a symposium attended by İzmir Metropolitan Mayor Tunç Soyer, who is the only member of the International Climate Organization from Turkey. I was thinking about bringing it up, so if they can get funding, it'd be great for something like this, and I hope we'll all be re-

membered there. Maybe we can make a decision like that there. That'd be great. Actually, a man in Mardin began planting millions of trees: an amazing effort, an amazing forest all his own. There are individual things like that, but I think that kind of move would be inspirational, and that's exactly what I had in my notes. It's so good of you to remind me of that.

P.B. If only every woman who reads also planted trees. I think it would give great results if every woman who reads a book, planted a tree for every book she reads.

B.U. Let's read from *Fire*. It will be a good way to end our discussion, until we meet again.

Uzuner reads from *Fire*, and ends our conversation with:

The book of *Fire* contained these lines, which appeared to have been written in green ink after the above pages written in black, red and navy ink by different female-ancestors and wise grandmothers who read it at different times and contributed different handwritings:

I received the Book of Fire as its new protector and keeper in the 18th year of the 21st century: Defne Kaman. I, the child of the Caucasian Bayülgen family, who have maintained the tradition of medicine for generations with the Asian Otacı family, whose paths are united in İstanbul for generations, promise on my conscience that I will add information of my own time, try to prevent it from being lost or damaged, until, I, Defne Kaman, will deliver this valuable treasure to its next owner.

I received the Book of Fire from my wise herbalist and pharmacist grandmother Umay Bayülgen only this year. I've been waiting for years to be able to read this ancient book that blessed wise women ancestors for generations. My grandmother Umay, since we ended up living in different cities due to life events, sent the Book of Fire from İstanbul to Mardin, where I now live, with a close friend, a messenger we trust, and who delivered it to me by hand.

The ancient Book of Fire, full of historical information about our roots, differs from the *Water*, *Earth* and *Air* Books, which were previously delivered to me. After reading it over and over again, I understood why grandmother Umay gave me the Book of Fire as the last of four elements. My grandmother apparently waited for me to realise the complexity what I now understand.

Because *Fire* is the book for those who comprehend the books on *Water*, *Earth* and *Air*, and still survive, *Fire* needs to be trusted to those who deserve it, who appreciate this blessed knowledge, a cult or culture, because it might burn.

Mevlâna is one of the people who taught me the importance and meaning of “nothingness” when I was a little girl. He explains that those who can accept it without fear of it, who can accept “nothingness” (hiçlik) by living without vanity and pure, will comprehend the truth, the essence of life. Mevlâna taught me that there can't be one, two or more without it before “nothing”, not without “zero”, because “nothing” has an inherent value. By saying that he was “immature, but now I am burned and learned”, Mevlâna teaches us that maturation is the result of going through various stages of challenges, loss, defeat, failure, loneliness. I understood by experience that ‘suffering’ purifies one's self, purifies like fire, and only then one matures.

Now it's time for me to tell you about how I am tested by fire. The title of my book will be: *Climate Catastrophe will be the Fire of the 21st Century*.

As Uzuner finished reading from *Fire*, we all sensed the dread and fear in our hearts that we might witness yet another summer of wild-fire flames in Anatolia and the entire Mediterranean region, stretching from Turkey to Spain. Losing trees to wildfire is akin to losing lives. And perhaps that is the very reason Buket Uzuner ended our conversation with this reading, emphasizing that “climate catastrophe will be the fire of the 21st century”. With the fourth book of the series, Uzuner as a novelist continues as an eco-shaman. This is her call to the reader to unite for climate struggle to build an alternative future.

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The Healing Mathematics of Life in a Gesture: Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*

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Abstract Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* gives a key to the awareness of connections between trees, the land, and all life. It shows the weight of a gesture in the revival of an apparently hostile desert, the role of an individual's action for the community, either local or global, and also the healing power of that gesture. The tree-planting performed by the fictional shepherd has echoes in reality through Wangari Maathai's action and the Greenbelt Movement and other individual or collective actions. The article tackles the importance of both a simple physical gesture and literature; it shows how one person's behaviour can make a difference and change the world.

Keywords Connections. Jean Giono. Land revival. Planting trees. Wangari Maathai.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Genesis. – 3 Connections Between Humans and the Land. – 4 Time to Understand Place. – 5 The Philosophy of Numbers or the Poetic Mathematics of Planting. – 6 Global Change in Local Gestures. – 7 A Healing Gesture. – 8 Conclusion: From Literature to Action.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-11-24
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Besson, F. (2022). "The Healing Mathematics of Life in a Gesture: Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 269-294.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/006

1 Introduction

Jean Giono wrote *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres* in 1953 for a course organised by the American magazine *Reader's Digest* on the theme "the most extraordinary character I ever met". The short story was pre-selected but not selected as the organisers had doubts about the truth of the facts told and about the existence of the central character. Later on, in a letter to the Water and Forests administrator of Digne, Jean Giono said that his character was imaginary and that his only aim was to make people love trees or more especially, to "make them love planting trees".¹ It is another American magazine, *Vogue*, that published the short story translated into English under the title "The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness". So, though written in French, the book was first published in English in the United States of America.

After being published by *Vogue*, one hundred thousand copies were published freely in the United States. The story was then published in several German magazines, and an Italian edition appeared in 1958. But it is not before 1973 that it was published in France in the *Revue Forestière Française*. Jean Giono offered his book to the world, free of copyrights. He wanted it to be as widely read as possible throughout the world, to encourage people to be the guardians of the earth by realising the weight of a gesture: planting a tree, an acorn or sewing a seed.

After being rejected a first time in the United States, and much longer in France, it became a major book in children's literature – even though Giono had not initially meant it for children – but also one of the major books in environmental literature; it is studied in schools and translated into many languages. In France, in 1983, it was published by the prestigious publishing house Gallimard with illustrations by Willi Glasauer. In 1987, an eponymous Canadian film was made by the illustrator Frederic Back and read by the French actor Philippe Noiret. This film received more than forty prizes throughout the world.² The book was published again in 2005 for the twentieth anniversary of its publication by Chelsea Green Publishing. That new edition was enriched with a foreword by Wangari Maathai, illustrations by Michael McCurdy and afterwords by Norma Goodrich and Andy Lipkis.

¹ In that letter, showing that the text should have a political function and be followed by facts, he said: "I'd like to meet you if it's possible for you, possible, to speak precisely about the practical use of that text. I think that the time has come to make a 'tree policy', even if the word policy does not seem well adapted". Letter to the Water and Forests administrator of Digne, Monsieur Valdeyron. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Homme_qui_plantait_des_arbres. If not otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author

² It can be watched on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5RmEWp-Lsk>.

Moreover, Frank Prevot echoed Giono's story by creating a children's book with illustrations by Aurelia Fronty and entitled *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees* in 2017, to tell the story of Wangari Maathai, who founded the Greenbelt Movement and, with hundreds of women, planted trees in Kenya to make the desert recede. The importance of her movement was such that it frightened the government and she and many others were imprisoned, before she received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004.

That connection between the French writer, his imaginary shepherd from Provence, and the Kenyan biologist and professor of veterinary anatomy, who fought all her life for sustainable development, peace, and social justice through the simple gesture of planting trees, reveals the power of a simple gesture connecting human hands and the soil. A forest can revive from one single acorn planted by one solitary man, through a mathematic reconstruction of the landscape that is possible thanks to the reunion of a fruit or a seed, a piece of land and a human hand.

2 Genesis

Jean Giono (1895-1970), like Marcel Pagnol, was a man from Provence. He was born in Manosque, a beautiful city on the foothills of Luberon. Most of his works are situated in Provence, in the peasants' world. The son of a "libertarian healer"³ who hosted many outcasts and exiled people, Giono evoked his childhood and his admired father in his novel *Jean le Bleu* (1932). Having to stop going to school in order to work because of his father's bad health, he went on studying by himself. When he was nineteen he met a young teacher to whom he read the texts he wrote. This was love at first sight but they could only marry after the First World War. Traumatized by the war (he participated in the most terrible battles - Artois, Champagne, Verdun, Somme, Chemin-des-Dames), he remained a pacifist all his life. During the Second World War and the Occupation, one of his plays, *Le Voyage en calèche*, written in 1943, was banned by the German censorship, as the play evokes a country (Italy) occupied by foreign troops and it tells the story of the resistance of a young romantic, non-violent man. Giono always spoke against war. He was a novelist, essayist and poet and also wrote several screenplays and translated Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Among more than thirty novels, narratives and short stories, we can mention *Colline* (1929), *Regain* (1930), *Jean le Bleu* (1932), *Le chant*

³ Cf. Durbet-Giono, S. (2002). *Jean Giono à Manosque - Le paradis, la maison d'un rêveur*. Paris: Belin.

du monde (1934), *Que ma joie demeure* (1935), *Pour saluer Melville* (1941), *L'eau vive* (1943), *Le hussard sur le toit* (1951); some were published posthumously like *Le bestiaire* (1991) or the children's book *Le petit garçon qui avait envie d'espace* (1995); and among the essays and journalist's chronicles, *Le serpent d'étoiles* (1933), *Les vraies richesses* (1936), and *Lettre aux paysans sur la pauvreté et la paix* (1938). Giono also published several collections of poems and plays. Several of his novels were adapted for the screen. An episode from *Jean le Bleu* was adapted for the screen by Marcel Pagnol to become the famous film with Raimu, *La femme du boulanger* (1938).

The Man Who Planted Trees, even if it looks like a fable, has its roots in human and nonhuman reality as appears in the role of names. Toponymy and onomastics are important in the genesis of the book as names give the reader information about Giono's aim. The main character's name is Elzéard Bouffier. The first name is a Hebrew name meaning "God's help", which is an indication that the shepherd appears as God's hand and even at the end, as a God-like figure. As for the name "Bouffier", it may have its origin in the Occitan verb *buffo*, meaning "to blow" and generally used to speak about the wind. The insistence on the strength of the wind blowing at the beginning of the story suggests that the wind seems to have shaped the landscape.

The other interesting name is the toponym: the name of the village is Vergons, a real village situated in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, in a mountainous area. The place name significantly comes from an Occitan word, *vergoun*, meaning 'wicker' or 'wood stick' and it is linked with the wood of the mountain of Chamatte, which can be climbed from Vergons.⁴ The origin of a wicker bed suggesting a place close to a stream is important as the story starts with a dry landscape from which all water has disappeared. Yet there are clues suggesting that there was water at one moment:

These clustered houses, although in ruins, like an old wasps' nest suggested that there must once have been a spring or a well here. There was indeed a spring, but it was dry. (4)

The comparison of the houses in ruins with "an old wasps' nest", reinforces the idea of both abandonment and an absence of life. The end of the story shows the role of trees that allowed water and life to come back. If Giono chose this real village, it may be because he knew it, but also because of the meaning of its name implicitly con-

⁴ See Nègre 1996. Pèire Thouy, an ornithologist, confirms the etymology and gives an interesting precision: "I agree with Ernest Nègre. *Vergons* is a diminutive of *vergas*, which designates sticks or scions (most often of wicker): to my mind, *Vergons* has a collective meaning and designates a wicker bed and thus a place close to a stream". Pèire Thouy, electronic message, 18 April 2022.

taining the presence of water, that vital water whose importance is so well tackled by another writer from Provence, Marcel Pagnol in *L'eau des collines* (1963). The genesis of *The Man Who Planted Trees* takes root in the very landscape.

3 Connections Between Humans and the Land

In Giono's tale, everything is seen from the point of view of a narrator who walks through the wild places of Provence. This is presented from the start as a face-to-face between a traveller and the land:

About forty years ago, I was taking a long trip on foot over mountains quite unknown to tourists, in that ancient region where the Alps thrust down into Provence. All this, at the time I embarked upon my long walk through these deserted regions, was barren and colorless land. Nothing grew there but wild lavender. (3)

The land is presented as a barren one: "deserted regions", "barren and colorless land", "nothing grew there". There is no colour except for the lavender whose blue colour does not appear; the plant is only mentioned for its wild quality, and its absence of colour also appears as a visible symptom of drought. As the traveller walks on, after three days, the desolate quality of the land is highlighted: "in the midst of unparalleled desolation" (4), "I camped nearby the vestiges of an abandoned village" (4). The desolation of the land caused the desolation of the human space, thus showing the close connection between the two. The houses are "in ruins". Everything evokes desolation and emptiness. Everything is marked by absence: the houses are "roofless", "all life had vanished" (4). Yet there is one element of hope: the narrator says that these houses "suggested that there must once have been a spring or well there" (4). And the day is "a fine June day, brilliant with sunlight". The presence of the sun, the fact that it is June, the month of the solstice, brings light, literally. But that brief tinge of light is followed by imagery conveying the violence of natural elements: "the wind blew with unendurable ferocity. It growled over. The carcasses of the houses like a lion disturbed at its meal" (5). The land and the houses are introduced as preys to the wind and the animal imagery reinforces the notion of violence bringing about death, since the houses are seen as "carcasses". Yet, there is a break. An isolated element introduces a rupture into the image of desolation and is integrated into the landscape: "I thought I glimpsed in the distance a small black silhouette, upright, and I took it for the trunk of a solitary tree" (5). The first vision the walker has of the shepherd is "small" and "black", it is not acknowledged as a human being but taken for "the trunk of a solitary tree". From

the start, before being introduced really, the shepherd is seen as being one with the world of trees. It is the landscape that introduces him to the walker and to the reader, showing them his main characteristics: solitude and solidity in apparent fragility; he also appears in communion with trees, being rooted in the land. For the narrator, that vision is an epiphany. The “small black silhouette” mistaken for the trunk of a tree, appears as not only a shepherd, taking care of his sheep, but as the guardian of the whole land. From the start, he is integrated into the landscape and connected to trees.

4 Time to Understand Place

Throughout the story, time plays an important part. The organic time of seasons is at the origin of the landscape. And the traveller gives precise temporal indications on the duration of his journey, thus suggesting the importance of the time of the clock in the story. While telling about his journey, he reminds the reader of what happened in the country, making the time of history enter the wild landscape. The First World War - he was a soldier - and the Second World War appear in the text, briefly, as if the shortness of historical time in the text should be put in parallel with the slowness and precise description of the evolution of the landscape thanks to one man, ignoring historical time. This does not mean that he ignored tragedies, quite the contrary. Giono the pacifist, who had seen the horrors of the First World War, like the narrator, just showed how the conscience of the place where we live can change the darkness of historical human time into the light of a renewed world. When, after the war during which he saw so many soldiers die beside him, a war whose horrors are printed in him, the narrator returns to the place where he had first met Elzéard Bouffier, a place that he had discovered as a place of desolation and absence, he thinks that the shepherd has probably died. For five years, he only saw suffering and death and cannot expect to find anything but death. And yet something leads him to that place as if he was attracted to the peace he had felt there when he was with the shepherd: “There was peace in being with this man” (10). Something seems paradoxical in the narrator’s choice, if we do not understand that, however desolate, barren, lifeless that land looked when he had discovered it, it was there that he had met peace, it was there that he had been given water, and it was there that he had seen a man who would have had all the reasons to lose hope, to be as desolate as the land where he lived, but who, on the contrary, made life return. Even if it was a place marked by the ‘ferocity’ of the wind, it was associated with a moment of peace before the human ferocity of the war. The man he had met there had lost his child and his wife, he had lived the most terrible tragedies a man can live in his life, but

he had given peace to his visitor and in both his suffering and in his connection with the land, he had found the inspiration to change loss and absence into revival and life: just by the conscience that planting trees would make things change. Instead of seeing his personal tragedy and all the desolation around him as reasons to give up, he used them as a lever to lift the world, to borrow the image chosen by Archimedes: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world". Giono's character just used a small acorn, the land and his hand to change the desert into a forest, to make water flow and humans live there again. The imagined tree that the shepherd was in the narrator's perception at the beginning of the story has become the living hand making trees grow again on the land, he has been the hand on which a whole land, a whole community, and strangers in need of water and peace could rest.

The historical time of wars and human events just occupies a few sentences in the book. The time of the walk, a slow time, brings about the awareness of two things: the importance of a place, the place where he will come back to find peace, a healing ground; and the awareness of the time necessary for a tree to grow. Everything is quiet in the shepherd's way of life, his everyday life, his way of providing the stranger with water, a meal and a place to rest, his way of showing him the land and his action on the land. Exactly as he provided the stranger with the water he needed to survive, he has done what was necessary to have that water "excellent water - from a very deep natural well above which he had constructed a primitive winch" (6). The time spent by the narrator with the shepherd, slowing him in his journey, shows him all the time necessary to pick up acorns, "to inspect them", to "separat[e] the good from the bad" (10), to select "one hundred perfect acorns" (10) and then to plant them.

If the narrator insists so much on time, it is to let the reader be aware of what he has realised by comparing various times. Clock time makes him aware of the slowness of nature's time, which transforms the landscape and reveals the place, which had first appeared as the shadow of a place, without water, without trees, without people living in villages, and nearly without life, a ghost place. Yet the slow time of a man's gestures and all the patience necessary for the care given to the trees he planted year after year to reconstitute a landscape of life, changed the place of death and despair into a place of happiness and hope, which was there but unseen, like the water under the ground, just waiting for the moment when the connections would be reestablished thanks to one person.

5 The Philosophy of Numbers or the Poetic Mathematics of Planting

The insistence of the narrator on time indications is part of a whole system of numbers pervading the text. The text is filled with numbers, dates, years, and in such a symbolical story, it is not by chance. On the other hand, there is a whirl of numbers facing this unique acorn. We can count seventy numbers in a book composed of only eighteen pages of text. These numbers concern time, space, and trees. It is either time passing or dates: “about forty years ago” (3), “after three days” (4). We know the progression in time through the indications of years, from 1910 to 1947, with the two wars of 1914 (“the war of 1914, in which I was involved for the next five years”, 17), and 1939 (28), which constituted “the only danger to the work” as many oaks planted by the shepherd had been cut for cars that “run on gazogenes (wood-burning generators)”. But it was much too expensive and it was abandoned. In fact it is the wild landscape where no railroads had been built yet that saved the trees. The shepherd’s relationship with time is often linked with the adverb “peacefully”, recurring again and again throughout the story, opposing the quietness of the shepherd’s gesture to the conflictual agitation and violence of human history. These temporal numbers are linked with a system of opposition, once again contrasting the destructive power of historical time (“I had seen too many men die during those five years”, 17) and the constructive power of a gesture revealing the rapidity of transformation: “It has taken only the eight years since then for the whole countryside to glow with health and prosperity” (33). Throughout the story we can also follow the shepherd’s evolution in age, from “[f]ifty-five” (14) to “eighty-seven” (29), thus showing how love for a land conveyed through a repetitive gesture of planting trees can cover a whole life and change the repetition of a gesture into the wonder of constantly new landscapes and new moments. The relationship with time for the wise man facing nature reminds us of Masanobu Fukuoka’s poem closing his seminal book, *The One-Straw Revolution*:

As I walk alone in the garden I see a temporary hut
 A day is a hundred years
 Daikon and mustard are in full bloom
 Dimly the moon shines in the year two thousand
 (Fukuoka 2009, 184)

There is no punctuation mark in this final poem in which the philosopher and farmer, whose philosophy of farming involved him in many projects all over the world to fight against desertification, shows life as a continuum, time as a continuum, the journey here and beyond as a continuum. As in Giono’s tale, numbers and time are at the core of

this poetic will where the perception of each day as a hundred years totally changes life and allows us to enjoy the present moment and to consider our present as the future of others: “the moon shines in the year two thousand”. The conscience of natural time replaces the time of the clock. Numbers and time united appear as a philosophy of life revealing the sense of one’s belonging to a world that is one. The face to face with nature takes us far from the time of the clock, as Scott Slovic experienced it in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon, where he spent a few days without any clock, just facing the forest: “what would it be like to step out of time for several days”, he writes, “and act as if there were simply day and night, rain and shine, no other minute parceling out of hours, minutes, and seconds?” (Slovic 2008, 207). His questioning leads him to feel the forest, to breathe in the forest, to be both in the present of his run and in the past of his childhood. Natural time leads him to feel his own life, past and present merging in his breathing in of the forest. Time does not disappear. It is just that organic time leads the runner, now an adult, to find the deepest part of himself in natural time. Minutes, hours, years are no longer separate. They are the forest. They are his childhood, in the moment he lives again by being impregnated with organic time. Like Elzéard Bouffier, the shepherd from Provence, the American runner and writer and the Japanese philosopher and farmer are alone: “I walk alone in the garden”, the philosopher writes. It is as if that loneliness, which does not mean solitude, was necessary to understand one’s own link with the land, one’s own link with oneself. This is what Chinese hermits did in the mountains of China.

The poetry of the one and the multiple is illustrated by the gesture of one shepherd planting thousands of trees. And another equation appears with thousands of trees constituting one forest. Niyi Osundare writes in the poem “Many Stars, One Sky”:

Many stars
One sky

A pageant of colors
One rainbow

Many trees
One forest

A medley of songs
One choir

[...]

A throng of people
 One world
 (Osundare 2021, 58)

The shepherd's gesture reminds us of this fundamental mathematics of the universe: "Many trees/One forest", "A throng of people/One world", as Niyi Osundare writes. The Nigerian poet reminds us that any whole is made of multiple parts, and each part is important just as every limb is necessary in one body. We are many but all in the same place, the earth, as the recent pandemic has reminded us. Giono's shepherd shows that one person can act for the community and recreate it. Space, like time, is concerned by that poetic mathematics of numbers.

In Giono's book, numbers linked with space concern either distance ("he climbed to the top of the ridge, about a hundred yards away", 13; "some twelve kilometers from his cottage", 23); or the quantification of houses, first in ruins and then restored: "five or six houses" (4), "five houses restored" (33). The numbers linked with houses reveal a human revival: "[n]ow there were twenty-eight inhabitants, four of them young married couples" (33).

Numbers are also linked with the shepherd's life as far as the living community surrounding him is concerned. It is first a non-human community, his dog, sheep and then bees: "[t]hirty sheep" (6), and later, "four sheep" (19), "a hundred beehives" (19); and then a human community, increasing as the number of trees increased. It grows from the only shepherd to the little group formed by the stranger and a friend of his, one of the forestry officers of the delegation who had "come from the Government to examine 'the natural forest'" (24) ("the three of us", 25), to a whole community meaning that life has come back to that place: "more than ten thousand people owe their happiness to Elzéard Bouffier" (34). These "more than ten thousand people" are contrasted numerically to "one man" (34). The use of numbers appears as a poetic way of expressing a philosophy revealing the weight of one person's gesture towards a land and a community.

And this is done thanks to the planting of trees. So it is not surprising that the greatest quantity of numbers should concern trees. This logically starts with number one since the acorns are planted "one by one" and then the technique is described in numbers: "he counted them out by tens", "when he had thus selected one hundred perfect acorns" (10), "[h]e planted his hundred acorns with the greatest care" (14). We can also observe that the tool used to plant the acorns, whose size is given, is "an iron rod about a yard and a half long" (13), which is used both as a walking stick and a planter. The fact that the stress is laid on this simple object reveals the importance of its double use: to plant acorns and to walk (13). Walking

forward and making holes to let trees grow are part of a same movement forward, and the tool with a double function is the symbolical sign of it. Both the walking movement and the gesture of the hand, digging a hole to fill an empty space with a promise of life, are important. A similar gesture is made by the little tramp at the end of Chaplin's film *A Dog's Life* (1918). Chaplin, for whom the hollow space is so often used, carefully digs holes in the soil to plant each seed, instead of broadcasting them as is usually done. Chaplin, whose solitary tramp has often been saved by holes in fences allowing an escape, chose the gesture of planting seeds as the image of happiness. The little tramp always fills this hollow world with the life that the society refuses to him. And the seeds planted and not sown, one by one, at the end of the film, are the sign of a happy ending, of happiness found as life is going to sprout out of the soil. Initially, the little tramp in the city is as solitary as the shepherd in the mountain. A dog will be his first companion, before a woman's love changes his life. For him it is the urban space that was marked by absence and emptiness, and it is through the gesture of planting seeds one by one that he reverses the process and changes the rejected homeless tramp into a farmer living in a house with his beloved and his dog and giving life to a piece of land. For Elzéard Bouffier, it is in the mountains made empty and barren because men cut all the trees that the shepherd reversed the process and made life come back, with the same gesture of planting a fruit into the soil to make a forest grow again and bring back happiness to the place.

Throughout the book, the narrator intersperses the story with information concerning the evolution in the number of trees: "He planted his hundred acorns with the greatest care" (14), "[f]or three years he had been planting trees in this wilderness" (14). And gradually there is a sort of overflowing of numbers; a series of short sentences suggest the relatively rapid increase of the forest:

He had planted one hundred thousand. Of the hundred thousand, twenty thousand had sprouted. Of the twenty thousand he still expected to lose about half, to rodents or to the unpredictable designs of Providence. (14)

And on the same page: "[t]here remained ten thousand oak trees to grow where nothing had grown before" (14), and then: "I told him that in thirty years his ten thousand oaks would be magnificent" (16), "[h]e answered quite simply that if God granted him life, in thirty years he would have planted so many more that these ten thousand would be like a drop of water in the ocean" (16). The gradual increase of the number of trees is such that the shepherd, who loves silence above all and said very few words, feels the need to explain things when it concerns the number of trees, as if to educate people to the

conscience of planting. He compares the ten thousand oaks growing at that moment, to a drop of water, and shows the importance of that drop of water, which, like the hummingbird's drops of water meant to put out a wildfire,⁵ will result in a forest composed of "three sections" and measuring "eleven kilometers in length and three kilometers at its greatest width" (21). As the story progresses, the counting of trees gives way to the measuring of a whole forest. Together with the oaks, the shepherd decided to plant beeches and one sentence is particularly poignant in its simplicity: the narrator says there were "handsome clumps of birch planted five years before – that is in 1915, when I had been fighting at Verdun" (21). Throughout the story, the numbers of human history and tragedies face the numbers of planted trees. The face to face is clear in this sentence in which the narrator is aware of the peaceful work of the shepherd: even at the moment when one of the most terrible battles in mankind's history was taking place, he was just planting trees. Exactly as when people cut trees to feed cars, he could not see that as he was far away. It is as if it were necessary for him to be away from human history made of destruction and murders at a huge scale, to just take his small iron rod and make holes to plant trees, to take care of the land, to recreate life in the wasteland.

6 Global Change in Local Gestures

The shepherd's gesture of planting acorns one after the other until the moment when a whole forest appears in the landscape is the illustration of what is often presented as a Native American legend, the story of the hummingbird's share of the work. French agro-ecologist Pierre Rabhi based his philosophy on the story. Here is the way he tells it:

One day there was a huge wildfire. All the animals, terrified and shocked, powerlessly observed the disaster. Only the small hummingbird was busy, flying to fetch a few drops in his beak to throw them on the fire. After a moment, the armadillo, irritated by that derisory agitation, said to him: "Hummingbird! Aren't you mad? It's not with those drops of water that you are going to put out the fire!" And the hummingbird answered: "I know it, but I'm doing my share of the work".⁶

⁵ About the hummingbird, see below.

⁶ <https://www.novethic.fr/actualite/environnement/agriculture/isr-rse/avec-la-mort-de-pierre-rabhi-son-reve-de-sobriete-heureuse-150369.html>.

Yet we must keep in mind that nothing is sure about that legend, which was taken up by lots of artists, in comics or tales.⁷ Maybe Pierre Rabhi does not give the original version (which is not really known) but the positive aspect of his book is that he spread the story in France. Even if lots of research has been done about it, no one really knows from which people the myth comes from. There may be correspondences between several stories and several peoples. In an article by Patrick Fishman, mentioned by Laurence De Cock and quoted by Le Quellec, Fishman writes that

the original legend shows a very determined hummingbird, who is angry, and is going to mobilize the pelicans, the only birds able to store enough water to put out the devastating fire: so it is not a drop-by-drop participation, individual and heroic, but the organization of a collective fight, not an appeal to wisdom and moderation but to radicality.⁸

Yet should wisdom and fight be opposed? Le Quellec mentions the source he found in the story told by a Haida artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, a story itself inspired by the Quecha, as Michelle Benjamin says in her postface to the book, the preface being by Wangari Maathai. Le Quellec says that

All [he] could find is a book by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, a Haida artist and environment fighter, born in 1954: *Flight of the Hummingbird*. This book was published several times. In 2020 Wangari Maathai wrote the preface [...]. Its subtitle, **A parable for the environment** shows that it is a militant's book, and not the publication of a traditional tale. At the end of the book, a postface by Michelle Benjamin reveals that this "story of a little bird, dedicated and determined to put out a wildfire, is based on a parable told by the Quechua in Ecuador". So it is a creation made by an artist who is very much concerned by the preservation of environment. (Le Quellec 2021; emphasis in the original)

In fact, Rabhi's interpretation of the story underlines the weight of the individual act whereas Yahgulanaas's story explains the need for collective action. Either being alone as in the French agro-ecologist's

⁷ For an interesting survey of the various occurrences of the hummingbird's story, see the article by Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, "Le vrai-faux mythe du colibri". <https://temp-sresents.com/2021/12/15/le-vrai-faux-mythe-du-colibri/>. I would like to thank the two reviewers for their interesting comments and suggestions, especially on the hummingbird's story.

⁸ Fishmann, P. (2018). "Et si le conte du colibri n'était pas gnanngnan?". *Reporterre*, 23 October. Quoted in Le Quellec 2021.

rewriting, or gathering many birds around him to show that nothing can be done without the union of living forces as in the Haida artist's rewriting of the Quechua legend, the hummingbird shows the weight of a gesture, be it individual or collective, or individual *and* collective. As every collective action must start with lots of individual decisions.

The symbolical gesture of the bird putting out a wildfire, alone or after mobilising more birds, comes to our minds when we read about a shepherd changing a sunburnt land deprived of the trees that once were there, by planting one acorn after the other. The drop of water in the hummingbird's beak or the acorn in the shepherd's hand tell the same story: a simple, apparently derisory gesture can make the whole difference. The smallest element brings life again to a vast land. Planting as an act of love and empathy for the community, a family, a village, a region, a country, the world: this is what Giono's shepherd does.

Giono's story located in a precise region of France, Provence, and in a precise village, Vergons, yet speaks to the whole world and about the whole world. What the simple story of a lonely shepherd living in a desolate landscape shows is that everything is possible with an individual's will and hand, a land, whatever its size, and a seed or a fruit. It shows that even a man who has lost everything, all the people he loved most, who lives in a place that seems totally hostile, even in the worst conditions, a man can change first his own life, then his local place, and then the life of a whole community and, when spreading the idea, he can change the world. The shepherd's action is not meant for himself, but for his land and because he knows that when the land becomes fertile again, life will change for everybody; he acts quietly, refusing all that breaks connections: possession, selfishness, and conflict. Exactly as he ignores the wars, he ignores possession. First he shares the few things that belong to him, "the water from his water-gourd" (6), his house, his meal (6). He also shares his skill by showing the stranger how to sort out good acorns from frail ones and then by showing him how to plant each acorn. And when the narrator questions him about who owns the land, his answers shows that possession is nothing if there is no care:

Did he know whose it was? He did not. He supposed it was community property, or perhaps belonged to people who cared nothing about it. He was not interested in finding out whose it was. He planted his hundred acorns with the greatest care. (13-14)

Everything starts from a man's awareness that "this land was dying for want of trees" (14). The shepherd's story develops from his first apparition to the last perception the narrator has of him:

But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result,

I am taken with an immense respect for that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God. (35)

The story presents the shepherd as the embodiment of both the landscape into which he is totally integrated when he is mistaken for a tree, and of a God-like figure. This is reinforced by his name Elzéard Bouffier, composed of a first name meaning 'God's help' and a surname linked with the action of the wind, blowing. He is also said to be "one of God's athletes" (26). Moreover, the shepherd's simple gestures of collecting acorns, "separating the good from the bad" (10), may appear as a biblical echo to the New Testament (Mt 13:24-30), symbolically evoking the sorting out of wheat and chaff, which gave the French phrase *séparer le bon grain de l'ivraie*, which Giono, who uses several Christian references in his novella, seemed to have in mind. Planting acorns, watering them, taking care of the young trees, all these actions transform the landscape from the "desolation" of the beginning of the story into a "land of Canaan":

When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. (35)

The metaphorical use of the "land of Canaan" sends us back to the Bible and the Promised Land and is part of the Christian expanded metaphor used by Giono. Canaan was the land promised to the Hebrews, a land for a migrating people who would find there all that was necessary for them to live. It has become here a metaphor of a heavenly land corresponding to some historical reality, revived in the shepherd's act of planting trees.

Connections are well shown by Wangari Maathai in her preface, taking up what she wrote in her autobiography, *Unbowed*, especially what her mother had taught her about the multiple roles of the fig-tree. It is interesting to note that Wangari Maathai also prefaced the 2020 edition of the *Flight of the Hummingbird* written by Haida artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. The shepherd's quiet individual gesture of planting trees and the hummingbird's mobilisation of a community to save the forest are connected through Wangari Maathai's writing: she suggests that everybody can act. Entitling her preface to *Flight of the Hummingbird* "Wisdom of the Hummingbird", she ends it with these words:

We sometimes underestimate what we can accomplish as individuals, but there is always something we can do. Like the little hummingbird in the story that follows, we must not allow ourselves to become overwhelmed, and we must not rest. This is what we are

called to do. Today and every day let us dedicate ourselves to making *mottainai*⁹ a reality. It is our human responsibility to appreciate nature and to preserve and protect the world's natural resources. We can all be like the hummingbird, doing the best we can.¹⁰

And in her preface to Giono's story, she shows the importance of connections and writes:

I first became aware of the importance of trees as a little girl, when my grandmother told me that I should not collect wood from the nearby fig tree because it was a gift from God. Even if I didn't know then why fig trees were special, I later understood that the fig-tree's deep roots tapped into underground streams and brought water to the surface, replenishing the land and bringing it life. Unfortunately, that indigenous wisdom, like the tree, did not survive the forces of colonialism and globalization. The pure stream where I used to play with frogspawn and tadpoles dried up, like the tree a victim of shortsighted forestry practices and the growing of cash crops.

I began to plant trees with the Green Belt Movement (GBM),¹¹ an organization I founded in 1977. Rural women had been telling me that they had to ask further and further to collect firewood for fuel. Their families were malnourished and their land was degraded. I saw that planting trees could provide these women with firewood, fruit, fodder for their livestock, and fencing for their land, and also stop soil erosion and keep streams flowing. Like the narrator of *The Man Who Planted Trees*, I saw human communities restored along with nature. (Maathai 2005, vii-viii)

Wangari Maathai shows the connection between her grandmother's wisdom and words, the fig tree and all its functions, and her fight to plant trees in Kenya. In her autobiography, here's the way she explained the connections between the fig tree and the underground water in a more scientific way:

I later learned that there was a connection between the fig tree's root system and the underground water reservoirs. The roots burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table. The

⁹ She explains the word *mottainai*: "In Japan I learned the Buddhist word *mottainai*. It embraces the practice of not wasting resources and of using them with respect and gratitude" (Wangari 2008, <http://www.vidyaonline.net/dl/hummingbird.pdf>).

¹⁰ <http://www.vidyaonline.net/dl/hummingbird.pdf>.

¹¹ <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org>.

water travelled up along the root until it hit a depression or weak place in the ground, and gushed out as a spring. Indeed wherever these trees stood, there were likely to be streams. The reverence the community had for the fig tree helped preserve the stream and the tadpoles that so captivated me. The trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides. In such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural or spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity. (Maathai 2006, 46)

Her autobiography exemplifies environmental literature as defined by Scott Slovic speaking about

Three I's: 1. **Indigeneities**: Attunement to **local** cultural traditions, vocabularies, environmental conditions. 2. **Intersections**: Illuminating or pursuing **connections** of various kinds, sometimes healthy and sometimes destructive. 3. **Interventions**: **Acting** upon issues of particular salience or urgency to specific regions. (Slovic 2010; emphasis in the original)

Listening to local cultural traditions, Maathai points out connections which she converts into action.

The metaphor of the African stool, which she uses in her preface as in her autobiography, explains the link “between good management of the environment, democratic space and peace”:

In my effort to describe the linkage between good management of the environment, democratic space and peace, I have adopted a metaphor of the three-legged African stool. The three legs represent basic pillars for stable nations without which sustainable development is unattainable. By linking environment, democracy, and peace, the Norwegian Nobel Committee expanded the concept of peace and security, and validated my long-held belief that only through an equitable distribution of those resources and their sustainable use will we be able to keep the peace. I feel that, in this quiet way, Elzéard Bouffier understands that, too. (Maathai 2005, viii)

The African stool is the sign of her taking root in the African soil. It also suggests that any political idea must be anchored in the soil, solidly placed and as stable as the stool with its three legs. And she reminds that Giono's character “understands that, too”. Maybe if he ignores the two world wars in the story, it is perhaps a way to oppose the space of peace created by a good management of the land, and the space of conflicts created by a will of possession, greed, and a will of power, notions ignored by Elzéard Bouffier who just plants trees and thus reconstitutes a space of life and peace where everybody can live peacefully together.

Wangari Maathai's text is not only the story of a life but it is also an invitation to go on fighting. It gives reality to other literary texts warning us against deforestation. Her autobiography ends with an injunction to fight, which is also a cry of hope:

Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless. If we really carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk! (Maathai 2006, 295)

This is what Giono's shepherd does, he "rises up and walks". His simple gesture in his face to face with the land, a face to face between a lonely man and a wasteland at the beginning of the story, is both a healing gesture to himself, to the land and a gift to future generations.

7 A Healing Gesture

Giono's shepherd's gesture of planting trees, one after the other, until a whole forest should be reconstituted, until water flows again, until life comes back in villages, shows the deep role of the individual gesture for the community, either local or global.

But before that, it is also a healing gesture in his own personal life. Elzéard Bouffier has lost his son and his wife, and instead of letting himself be overcome with grief, he chose to restore the landscape where he lives. His personal life has been devastated by the death of the people he loved most. He decides to devote his life to bringing life again to the place, to the area and to a wider and wider area. The narrator evokes the two world wars that devastated the country and that caused so many deaths, he himself having seen so many of his comrades die beside him, having faced the horrors of war. Meanwhile the shepherd went on bringing life to the land, through his gesture of planting trees and taking care of them.

Planting as a healing gesture goes even further when we think about recent research concerning a virus that killed horses and humans in Australia in the '90s, showing the role of trees. After twenty years' research, a scientist realised that the problem came from the fact that there was no longer any tree blooming in winter, which would have given bats a habitat and preserved the horses grazing in summer under a tree where the bats lived. The researcher explained that the solution to prevent the virus from appearing again was to plant trees blooming in winter, thus offering the bats a habitat. The scientists explain the "inter-related linkages between land use and wildlife disease dynamics":

In general terms, three potentially inter-related linkages between land use and wildlife disease dynamics are clear: (1) ecological patterns across the landscape determine the distribution and abundance of biota, including pathogens and their hosts; (2) environmental stress affects wildlife susceptibility to pathogen *infection*, as well as the likelihood of wildlife *shedding* pathogens in a manner that increases exposure of other animals (including humans); and (3) human-altered landscapes bring wildlife into closer proximity to domestic animals and humans, thus increasing the likelihood that shed pathogens will *spill over* into populations of other species (ultimately, humans) where they may *spread* further. (Reaser et al. 2022; emphasis in the original)

Virologist Raina Plowright said that many studies have made the link between deforestation and the transmission of viruses. The researcher said that there were only five trees producing flowers in winter, trees that have almost completely disappeared from the landscape. So now, she said, the aim is to plant these trees again, on a surface big enough and with a sufficient diversity for the bats to find food in winter. And they think that this will allow them to avoid epidemics. Twenty-four years were necessary for researchers to understand the system and conclude that natural habitat was at the core of the problem. Planting trees again is the solution. The conclusion of the documentary is that

once we have learnt to understand the signals sent by nature, then only will we be able to sleep quietly. Without thinking about those viruses surrounding us and having done of us what we are.¹²

In this article Raina Plowright and other researchers demonstrate that

landscape immunity is defined as the ecological conditions that, in combination, maintain and strengthen the immune function of wild species within a particular ecosystem and prevent elevated pathogen prevalence and pathogen shedding into the environment. (Reaser et al. 2022, 4-5)

Giono's shepherd meets scientists' discoveries about the necessity of reconstituting the habitat of wild species to preserve human life; he did what his ancestors had done, and with a simple gesture of

¹² *La loi de la jungle*, written and directed by Florent Muller. Images by Frédéric Capron, Romain Potocki. Production manager, Sophie Knoll. France.tv studio/France Télévisions, 2022.

common sense, he just tried to restore the landscape and the habitat that had disappeared. The human microcosm appearing in the area initially depicts human flaws, with aggressiveness and violence that seems generated by the hostile land. The human world lives a hard life in an “excessively harsh” climate (9), which shows the link between the climate and human predicament. The hostile, dry landscape with a ferocious wind blowing on it seems to be reflected in the human life. The lexical field of hostility highlights that harshness: “unceasing conflict of personality”, “perpetual grinds”, “grievings”, “rivalry in everything”, “ceaseless combat between virtue and vice” (9), with the climax of the description in “epidemics of suicides and frequent cases of insanity, usually homicidal” (10). The bond between that dark life and nature appears through the reference to the wind: “[a]nd over all there was the wind, also ceaseless, to rasp upon, the nerves” (10). Placed between the war opposing vice and virtue and the “epidemics of suicide”, the wind appears as a powerful force generating everything. But the shepherd’s life shows an alternative. This dark depiction of human life in that barren region will be reversed after the shepherd’s quiet and patient action. Even if he could have been desperate because of so many trials, he chose to act, in the most simple way, by planting acorns and taking care of the young trees. And on the same page, the narrator gives a vision opposed to that world dominated by conflicts and violence: “[t]here was peace in being with this man” (10). The first vision of the human world in a hostile barren landscape will be replaced in the end by a very different human world. Instead of despair and death, hope and life pervade the landscape: “hope then had returned” (30). The ferocious wind has become “a gentle breeze” (30), and this breeze has the sound of water, which becomes real water since “a fountain had been built [...] it flowed freely”. Thanks to the alliteration in [f], the text echoes the murmur of the water that has come back. The emphasis is on change: “[e]verything was changed” (30). Just a few acorns and the gesture of an isolated man have changed desolation into life, conflict into peace, drought and ferocity into the softness of the breeze in the forest and on the water. The plantation of one tree appears as the climax of emotion. After seeing the shepherd planting acorns, and later seeing the results in the forest that had grown, the narrator says:

I saw that a fountain had been built, that it flowed freely and - what touched me most - that someone had planted a linden beside it, a linden that must have been four years old, already in full leaf, the incontestable symbol of resurrection. (30)

He had seen the shepherd plant thousands of trees and yet what touches him most is the fact that another person should have plant-

ed one tree. Because this is the sign that the shepherd's action will be continued, that, by planting trees and reconstituting a forest, he has spread the conscience of the gesture, of the many ways in which planting a tree can matter. He uses the strong religious word of "resurrection" and that symbol of resurrection is reinforced by the reference to Lazarus several pages further: "Lazarus was out of the tomb" (33). The clear spiritual semantic field leads the walker from desolation to resurrection and to a "land of Canaan" in which a solitary shepherd who had lost everything, simply decided to make life reappear, slowly, gradually, step by step. His unselfish gesture made in the present of his solitary life was meant for the future of the generations that would come back when the small acorns had become a forest, thus allowing the resurgence of water, bringing about the fertility of gardens and family life and changing the climate. The warm climate due to the absence of forests that had destroyed all life became a soft climate because of the forests, the return of water, evaporation, clouds and rain, thus of fertility and life.

The shepherd's gesture was the result of both his knowledge of nature, his visionary perception and his unselfish gesture changing what should have been personal despair into the revival of a whole land and a whole community and a lesson to the world. Planting acorns and taking care of the young trees healed him as when he lived a personal tragedy, instead of shutting himself in his sorrow, he saw a mission that he perceived in the tragedies brought about by a world where all biodiversity had been destroyed, thus causing climate change, thus bringing about human diseases and death. In that desperate world he saw that the reverse was possible. With one gesture, quietly reproduced thousands of times, he reintroduced biodiversity, and subsequently the climate changed to bring about rain and a soft breeze generating peace and happiness in numerous families. One man, with his one repeated gesture, has brought a whole community back together again.

8 Conclusion: From Literature to Action

The shepherd's work in what is both presented as a true story and has all the appearance of a fable constantly mingles reality and imagination. The toponym corresponds to a French village and the region corresponds to an existing area. Historical facts are real. The narrator has lived the same trauma as the author. But the main character, who was supposed to be a true person, is invented. The final metaphor of the land of Canaan belongs to the field of poetic creation and to a biblical myth at the same time. But it was also a geographical region that existed. Moreover, the very name has given birth to an organisation in Africa, i.e. Canaan Land, which is a social organ-

isation in Ivory Coast, using an inclusive model of seasoned agriculture. The aim is to feed the population of Ivory Coast by developing a model of inclusive and sustainable agriculture, helping small peasant women while respecting the environment.¹³

Giono's tale and its fame are the material illustration of the fact that literature either can have a deep influence or can foreshadow action. This tale apparently just telling a story is in fact a beautiful example of literary activism and the parallel existing between the imaginary shepherd's action in a small part of Provence and Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt movement in Kenya shows two forms of activism. In the 2005 anniversary edition indeed, Giono's tale is framed by texts of people having founded organisations: a preface by Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement and Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004, and an afterword by Andy Lipkis, the founder of TreePeople.¹⁴ Moreover, at the end of the book, there is a list of US-based organisations helping reforestation and allowing people to plant trees, for example *Trees for Life*, thanks to which people can plant fruit trees in developing countries. The tale is clearly presented as belonging to activism and it has been adopted by some creators of organisations, thus showing that the literary work and real planting through organisations are not separated but complementary.

Vanessa Kohner, in her PHD thesis, *Récits et écologies: pratique de l'attention polyphonique*, analysing Jean Giono's tale, speaks about "vegetal activism". Studying the novella from a philosophical point of view, (analysing especially the fact that it is presented as a real fact but is fiction, as Giono said later), she says that "this tale questions the statute of fiction, the role of the efficient, even pragmatic lie" (Kohner 2018, 92). She adds that

to urge people to practice a tree policy, Giono offers a narrative that is completely fabricated and he creates a character about whom he cultivates some hesitation about whether he could exist on a mode making him appear in a civil register. (98)

Her philosophical analysis leads her to claim that "[t]he creation of truth in *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* calls the reader to create a real meeting a future that should not be apocalyptic" (98). And she alludes to Frédéric Back, who made the film from Giono's tale and who had already planted 3,000 trees "when he met Jean Giono's tale". Vanessa Kohner analyses the theme of loss in Giono's tale, and this appears as a way of leading us "to think with the experience of loss": "[w]ith the current ecological mutations", she writes, "it seems that

¹³ <https://canaanland.africa>.

¹⁴ <https://www.treepeople.org>.

we have to learn how to live in a world changing very quickly, and to learn to think with the experience of loss" (100). The shepherd's loss of his wife and his son is changed into a will to bring life to the land and to other people, into an attention to the world. "To see the breath of beloved people leave the flesh body and mingle with the rest of the universe can activate some attention to essential things" (104). Vanessa Kohner's brilliant philosophical analysis of Giono's tale shows its political dimension:

In Giono's tale, the fact of *hoping* is some activist optimism, a militant positivity, giving a meaning, making things move and making the senses dance in the present. Creating small breaths that would activate the living in us and around, is necessary to act collectively to build a world that should not dig its own grave. [...] Hope helps us to visualise a sense/a direction. (124)

Vanessa Kohner's philosophical approach of Giono's tale underlines the link between every individual's personal life and his/her possible action to change things in the world and give the world hope. Activism in words to lead people to activism in facts.

Giono's tale has sowed many seeds throughout the world, making things change. In 2016, the British scientist, environmentalist and sylvologist Gabriel Hemery wrote a sequel to Giono's tale, entitled "The Man Who Harvested Trees and Gifted Life". Gabriel Hemery is also the co-founder, with Sir Martin Wood, of the Sylva Foundation.¹⁵ Jim Robins published a book inspired from Giono's tale in 2012: *The Man Who Planted Trees: Lost Groves, Champion Trees, and an Urgent Plan to Save the Planet*. It tells the true story of David Milarch, the co-founder of Archangel Ancient Tree Archive, who clones the biggest trees on the planet to save forests and ecosystems.¹⁶ Late Terry Mock, a member of the team, the creator of Tree of Life Sustainable Development Consulting and the co-founder of Sustainable Land Development Initiative, has developed a project of research, education and leisure in the field of eco-forestry and permaculture in the greatest ancient forest of the south coast of Oregon (see Learn 2012). The notion of tree archive is a different conception of planting since the aim is not simply to plant trees but to save ancient species of trees that are threatened. In France an organisation like Reforestaction¹⁷ acts for reforestation locally and globally. And after the "Call for Living Forests" (Appel pour des forêts vivantes), a movement was born to act against the industrialisation of forests (d'Allens 2021). In Feb-

¹⁵ <https://www.sylva.org.uk>.

¹⁶ "Ancient Trees for the Future" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y069UFbk11s>).

¹⁷ <https://www.reforestaction.com>.

bruary 2022, children planted three hundred trees with the organisation Des enfants et des Arbres (Cattiaux 2022).

Jean Giono's tale, initially rejected because there was no proof that the shepherd was a true person, has lots of echoes in reality: Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, Andy Lipkis's TreePeople, and even the research engine ECOSIA, all work to involve people to plant trees and to make them aware of the connection existing between trees, the whole environment and human life.¹⁸

All those initiatives, books, organisations, show the link between the local and the global. "The locality is the only universal", as the poet William Carlos Williams wrote after John Dewey.¹⁹ This is what Giono's tale suggests. That book spreads the simple idea that every person can act to change the world in every place, even the most hostile one and even if that person has lived the most tragic experiences. Its genre is uncertain, as it is considered as either a short story, a tale, a fable or a children's book; but there is one certainty: its spreading of words works like the shepherd's gesture spreading oaks and changing a desert into a beautiful fertile land. In *Lanceur de graines*, Giono wrote: "Do you fear words? It's with them that you make the truth" (Giono 1995, 115). Giono spread words into reality as Elzéard Bouffier spread life in an imaginary world being a mirror placed before our real world. A regional story, deeply rooted in the soil of Provence, has become the fertiliser of millions of trees planted throughout the world. It has become the fertiliser of consciences, changing "unparalleled desolation" (4) into "Canop[ies] of Hope".²⁰

¹⁸ <https://www.ecosia.org>. ECOSIA is a German research engine created in 2009. It has the same function as Google, except that 80% of its benefits are given to organisations working for reforestation. Each research made by an individual is part of a programme of reforestation. After forty-five researches by one person, a tree is planted. The virtual dimension of a research engine is reversed to make the virtual action a concrete act, a return to the soil. The equation 'clicking on ECOSIA is planting a tree' reinvents virtual life. Through videos, the research engine teaches people the importance of forests and the damage they undergo. If most people in the world used ECOSIA instead of Google, or simply shared their researches, using partly Google and partly ECOSIA, this would make a difference both concerning reforestation and concerning the awareness of the role each individual can have. Some examples of their videos: "The search engine that plants trees" (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1_up347GdfKBD-VGqwjt7Aw); "Plant Trees Online" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRDA1ynrHTU>).

¹⁹ "Already in 1920, as John Beck has pointed out, Williams was impressed by an article John Dewey wrote for *The Dial* that argued that 'the locality is the only universal' (Dewey 697); he used that phrase in a manifesto in the second issue of *Contact*, a little magazine he edited" (Rigaud 2016).

²⁰ "Canopy of Hope" is the title of the epilogue of Wangari Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed: A Memoir*.

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Trees in Taiwanese Folklore

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Abstract In Taiwanese folklore, the worship of immortal trees has taken various forms. Often such practices are closely related to the worship of the earth god. In other cases, what is called *Dashugong*, literally ‘great tree god’, acts as a child’s guardian figure: the health and reproduction of a living tree in an otherworldly setting parallel the health and posterity of a human being. Religious rituals associated with ancient tree worship continue today. Trees symbolise fertility in folk beliefs and in folk art, and the impact of ancient beliefs may be traced in horticultural practices, and in the retail sale of trees. The idea that gods reside in large trees persists, as does the belief that a tree spirit appears only when it – or the living tree – is confronted, wounded, or killed. Reacting to such violence, a tree spirit becomes vengeful and dangerous. Government agencies and environmentalists have alluded to this concept to promote conservation. When an old tree dies, people nowadays plant a sapling to replace it. The tree of life continues to be celebrated, no longer for its gigantic profile but as a symbol of renewal.

Keywords Tree worship. Tree of life. Moon Festival. Lantern Festival. Children’s guardian deity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Tree Gods as Parents. – 3 A Tree of Life in a Cosmic Garden. – 4 A Few Money Trees. – 5 Tree Spirits. – 6 Tree Folklore and Environmental Protection.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-07-13
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published 2022-12-15

Open access

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Citation Yang, Y. (2022). “Trees in Taiwanese Folklore”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 295-306.

1 Introduction

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade describes a cosmic tree.

The mystery of the inexhaustible appearance of life is bound up with the rhythmical renewal of the cosmos. This is why the cosmos was imagined in the form of a gigantic tree; the mode of being of the cosmos, and first of all its capacity for endless regeneration, are symbolically expressed by the life of the tree. (Eliade 1963, 148)

Just like other symbols of immortality, trees imply a seemingly never-ending regeneration cycle. The notion manifests in the tree's shedding all leaves in the fall and regaining new leaves and vigour come spring. Particularly with large trees, a dense leafy crown attests to prolificacy, sturdy trunks to strength, and the various creatures residing underneath the sheltering foliage to their constant protection. Large trees live long, often longer than human beings, so they suggest longevity. For these reasons, trees became symbols of life, informing many customs meant to prolong life.

In this article, I shall detail various facets of arboreal folklore that are still alive in contemporary Taiwan. Related myths and legends provide a conceptual framework. I shall go on to describe several cases of arboreal folklore affecting human behaviour. Finally, I shall try to explain how this folklore can help promote environmental conservation.

2 Tree Gods as Parents

One of Taiwan's most important traditions is the Mid-Autumn Festival or Moon Festival, which falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. It is celebrated within every household and in the public sphere. The family reunions that take place are called, in Mandarin, *tuanyuan*, literally 'group round', a phrase used to describe the lunar sphere. Moon gazing follows a big family dinner. In southern Taiwan the Mid-Autumn Festival is considered the earth god's birthday. During the day, worshippers bring offerings of food to temples or shrines devoted to the god. A stage is usually erected before the temple, and *budai* puppet shows are performed. Ritual activities also occur at small shrines set underneath large trees, affectionately called *Dashugong* or 'God of the Great Tree'. In these rare cases, it is the *Dashugong*'s birthday that is celebrated.

The worship of *Dashugong* evolved from an ancient form of earth worship, first seen in a text dated to the fourth century BC. In order to mark the mound of earth that they worshipped, people planted a

tree atop it. Today's worship of *Dashugong* is a reminiscence of that custom (Yang 2000, 129-41).¹ The term *gong* means 'grandfather' and is also an honorific term for a male deity, making *Dashugong* 'Grandpa Big Tree' or 'God of the Great Tree'. Some of these deified trees are banyans, others bishop trees or Chinese hackberries, all common species on Taiwan's coastal plain. Needless to say, tree gods are often visibly impressive, noticeable even from afar. They either boast a massive trunk, sport expansive foliage, exhibit grotesque gnarls, or resemble in silhouette a well-known image or person (You 2004, 101-27). *Dashugong* trees invariably live a long life, remaining obvious landmarks for generations of villagers.

Exactly when and how the Moon Festival united worship of large tree gods and the earth god defies precise dating. However, the underlying reasons for their combination are not too obscure. Large trees are grand and sturdy. The largest plants on earth, they live for a long time, spanning many human generations. Prominent, with a development comparable to that of humans, they lent themselves readily to life's symbolism the world over (Lechler 1937, 369-41). And a Chinese myth links trees and the moon. According to the tale, a number of characters reside on the lunar surface. When beautiful Chang-E stole and swallowed her husband's elixir of eternal life, she was swept up to the moon. Legend has it that she is accompanied by a rabbit pounding herbal remedies with a pestle, supposedly making an elixir of eternal life. Another resident is a man named Wu Gang, who spends his days fruitlessly chopping at a tree trunk that instantly heals (He 1999, 53-60). Myths like these spell out the moon's association with vitality. Just as a tree goes through an annual cycle, the moon waxes and wanes - both imply everlasting life (Eliade 1958, 154-71). Therefore, the mythical triad of moon-tree-vitality explains folkloric practice.

Various legends recount the marvels of individual tree gods, which bestow blessings, heal illnesses, and rescue believers from calamities (Luo, Cheng, Yang 2009, 15-29). Such acts parallel those of other deities, as does the protection of children. This is best illustrated by the annual rituals performed during Mid-Autumn Festival. Many people in Taiwan believe that weak or disaster-prone children need a deity's protection to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood. The parents of such children visit temples devoted to the deities they are familiar with, using divination blocks to ascertain whether the deity will 'adopt' the child, who is expected to preserve the relation by paying respect to the 'godfather' or 'godmother' (literally) on the deity's birthday.

Since many tree gods celebrate their 'birthday' during the Mid-Autumn Festival, convention has made that the day for the 'adopted

¹ Those who worship earth focus on a mound of earth, a large tree, or a stone.

children' to visit their guardians. Parents and child bring offerings and worship the tree god just as they would any other god. Before the child departs, he or she is given a leaf from the tree god, which is worn on a red string tied around the neck, along with a talisman from the shrine or temple. Every year, the child repeats this ritual, and the leaf is replaced, until he or she turns 16, the legal age of adulthood of late imperial China. Thanks to a symbolic kinship, the child is connected with the tree god through a fictive vein that conveys vital force. The annual visit recharges the child's vitality: the weak become strong, bad fortune is ameliorated, and the child grows up.

3 A Tree of Life in a Cosmic Garden

In contrast to the physicality of a massive tree, Taiwanese people also believe in an otherworldly garden that mirrors the human sphere. An old couple, Flower Grandpa and Flower Grandma, tend to the plants in that far-off world, where every human life is represented by a tree or flowering bush; the health of one affects the other. Whenever a person falls ill or succumbs to bad luck, it is said that his or her plant-twin is suffering, whether fallen down, withered, or attacked by vermin. To remedy this, a Daoist master is asked to conduct a ritual called 'fortifying the flower bush' (in Taiwanese pronunciation, *king hue tsâng*), enlisting help from Flower Grandpa and Flower Grandma to nurse the afflicted plant so as to restore the health of the unfortunate human.

A woman's tree or bush requires special attention to promote or improve her health in general and to guarantee her fertility. If a woman fails to conceive a few years after she is married, some may think it prudent to check on her flower bush in the garden of fate. Reading that plant reveals not only the details of her health, but her reproductive future too. For example, a plant with two red flowers and one white flower is taken to mean that its human-twin will bear two daughters and one son in her lifetime. In the case of a failure to conceive, the ritual master begins by determining the reason for her infertility. If poor health is the diagnosis, then 'fortifying the flower bush' must be performed. Once the plant has been invigorated, the woman regains her health, and conception should follow. If the investigation reveals no flower buds on the plant, the woman is destined to be barren. Then the ritual master performs another kind of ritual, called *tsai hue tsâng* in Taiwanese (planting the flower bush). That is, the original plant is replaced with a new and healthy plant expected to blossom. With this ritual, it is believed that the woman's fate can be reversed, ensuring that she will eventually give birth to children.

During the millennia of agriculture's dominance over industry, male offspring were preferred to females due to the reliance of farm-

ing on heavy labor; in addition, the succession of patriarchal lineages requires male scions. Such issues understandably affected an expectant woman's thinking about her unborn child's sex (especially if she had already given birth to several girls). This is when the 'changing flowers' ritual (*uānn hue* in Taiwanese) might have come in handy. The purpose of 'changing flowers' is to alter the sex allotted to her child, so that she will get the son or daughter that she prefers. In a detailed record of the ritual, Kang Shiyu describes how real flowers and paper flowers are used in a temple devoted to Madame Linshui, the guardian goddess of maternity and newborns. The ritual master guides the expectant woman to pluck paper flowers of her desired color off a paper structure labelled 'flower bush palace'. It is worth mentioning that the character for 'palace' used there is the same as the one used for 'uterus'. The woman has to hide at her home whatever she has plucked, adorning her hair with the flowers for three days.

When those days have elapsed, the next steps are taken. A potted plant that rested on the offering table during the 'changing flowers' ritual is covered with a piece of red cloth. The ritual master instructs the couple to tend the plant, keeping it first in their bedroom, shifting it outside after 12 days. If they succeed, the couple can also apply to Madame Linshui to adopt their child (Kang 2006, 133-200). Out of this framework arises yet another ritual – much simpler, less magical – called 'beseeching the flower'.

The most opportune time for "beseeching the flower" is Yuanxiao, known as the Lantern Festival. It falls on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. This is the day when all New Year activities reach a final climax, just before everyone resumes his or her normal routine. This is the time when countless rituals related to fertility are conducted, for the sake of crops, livestock, and human beings. 'Beseeching the flower' allegedly started in Peitian Temple in Potzu, Jiayi County, Taiwan. (I am skeptical because about ten years ago, on a trip to southern Fujian, I witnessed a very similar fertility ritual.) During the days before Yuanxiao, two plastic trees are erected in the courtyard of this temple devoted to the goddess Mazu. One is adorned with red flowers, the other with white ones. Unlike the flower bush ritual mentioned above, 'beseeching the flower' does not require the mediation of a ritual master; it can be coordinated by temple staff from the temple or conducted on one's own. Peitian Temple has even printed an instructional leaflet for couples hoping for a child. It outlines how to throw the divination blocks that convey Mazu's response to their appeal.

Having summarised the relevant rituals, I shall offer some observations. With *Dashugong*, an adoption ritual constructs an artificial kinship between tree and child. The talisman and leaf received from the tree god embody this (otherwise) invisible bond. Just like a pregnant mother conveying nourishment to a fetus, sympathetic

magic's law of contagion ensures that the tree god's vitality passes to the child via the leaf. The *dashugong* functions like a parent. Although related through fictive kinship, the tree god and the child are separate beings. With the flower bush, however, the rituals grow from the metaphor 'Human life is a (flowering) tree'. The analogy blends features from the human and arboreal realms, fashioning a new space where the living experiences of the two realms are perceived in the same way. In this new mental space, trees are human, flowers their offspring. One can infer that trees bestow on humans their offspring – trees give life.

4 A Few Money Trees

Trees not only assist with human lives, they also bear valuable fruits. While money trees cast in iron or fashioned from potters' clay have been found in archaeological sites that dated from the Three Kingdom period (220-280 AD), that tradition seems to have died out (Zhang 2001, 25-9).² However, the notion of a tree that produces an inexhaustible supply of coins is fascinating, and the image remains a popular auspicious symbol to this day. In Taiwanese folk art, the money tree often appears, whether painted or carved from wood or stone. A favourite location is temples. During New Year holidays, money trees materialise on the market to enhance the festive mood. Vendors adorn little kumquat trees with plastic coins and ingots, or simply red-and-gold ribbons. Another tree that came to be associated with money is the cat-tail willow (*Salix gracilistyla*), whose shiny bark and red buds are pleasing to the eye. A common name in Taiwanese, *gīn liú* (silver willow), sounds much like the term *gīn niú* (silver ingot). Both are very popular domestic decorations during the New Year.

But perhaps because many people hope to get rich, and their thoughts on the subject are not limited to the New Year season, yet another type of money tree emerged. In 1986, a Taiwanese truck driver came up with the idea of planting five Malabar chestnut (*Pachira aquatica*) seeds in a single pot and braiding their stalks as they grew. The concept soon took off, and the trees became an important export (Zheng 2006). To lend the product a feeling of auspiciousness, the trade settled on calling the plants 'five lucks' or *wufu*, a vague concept traditionally used to encompass all good fortune. This meshed well with the idea that the rapid growth of the species symbolised speedy advancement (Kong 2022). Soon the plants gained the nick-

² Zhang Maohua argues, however, that instead of calling such treelike structures 'money trees', we should call these uprights connecting heaven and earth *axes mundi* or 'world pillars'.

name ‘money tree’. For decades, such money trees have been ubiquitous in shops and offices, and no opening celebration, whether of a small business or a local event, is complete without one. In recent years, consumers have welcomed a new type of money tree, now made of crystals and semiprecious stones. Such glittering objects are luxurious, showy household ornaments.

5 Tree Spirits

While money trees can be very mundane, the indigenous peoples of Taiwan consider large trees something to be revered and even feared since each of them harbours a tree spirit. The Tsou people, who have long resided in the mountainous area of Alishan, trace their origins to a tree. Once a goddess shook the seeds from a maple tree, which fell to the ground. The seeds germinated and became the ancestral Tsou, and their sacred native place is named after the tree. In practice, the Tsou also venerate the large-leaf banyan (*Ficus subpisocarpa*), particularly the large ones planted near their assembly hall. Each year, during their annual Mayasvi (Triumph Festival), tribal elders invite their ancestors’ spirits to join the festival by climbing down from heaven by way of these banyan trees. Large trees planted at the gate of a settlement or house serve as guardian spirits, shielding residents from disease and supernatural invasion (Pu 2019, 11).

Inside the Alishan resort, a traditional Tsou territory, stands a memorial dedicated to the tree spirits. Erected in 1935 by the Japanese colonial government, the memorial claims to have appeased the tree spirits whose ire was aroused by a large lumber operation. Although Zhang Jialun challenges this account, citing evidence from contemporaneous newspapers to prove that the memorial was really meant to uphold a forest conservation policy, part of a broader colonial effort to consolidate Taiwan’s status as part of imperial Japan.³ Regardless, it did not stop “ghost stories” of ferocious tree spirits from circulating in the area. For decades, lumberjacks were said to be scared out of their minds or frightened to death. While the idea that trees had spirits was not new, there was something novel to the suggestion that tree spirits were capable of expressing emotions, that trees have minds very similar to those of human beings. When trees suffer a violent, untimely death, they become wrathful and are likely to exact vengeance.

Vengeful trees occur not just in Tsou folklore, but in that of ethnic Han people as well. Every once in a while, accounts circulate about

³ Zhang Jialun, however, has argued that the memorial emerged from Japan’s ‘green movement’, and that it glorified the nature-loving Japanese empire. See <https://storystudio.tw/article/gushi/alishanforest/>.

some tree spirits offended by human beings who causes misfortune. Enough cases have turned up over a long period to fuel both reverence and fear. During the Ghost Festival of 2012, a certain farmer named Chen executed a purgatorial ritual, or *pudu*, before chopping down several betel palms on his property. His qualms had driven him to appease the tree spirits (Huang 2012). Of course, not everyone is as conscientious as the farmer in question. So when trees are injured or improperly transplanted, those responsible learn of the tree's outrage one way or another (Wu 2017, 234-5).⁴ Such occasions demand repenting or rectifying the wrongdoing, somehow making amends to the tree.

Consider an extreme case from 2007. Houzhen, in Yizhu Township, Jiayi County, is a remote rural village with no more than two hundred households. For residents, 2006 and 2007 were tough. Approximately twenty residents died of old age, disease, and other causes. The unusually high mortality rate stirred up panic. Seeking an explanation, they prayed to the village deity, Lord Chi of Zhen'an Temple. Through a spirit medium, Lord Chi informed the villagers that a tree murdered seven years earlier was seeking revenge by inflicting misfortune on the village. Villagers alleged that a landowner poured herbicide to the soil around the tree because he had other plans for the land. In response to that disclosure, Lord Chi gave detailed ritual instructions for ending the misfortunes and ensuring a peaceful future (Cai 2007). The villagers complied: they prepared scapegoats made of hay, all according to the deity's instructions. Attached to each scapegoat – which stood for a family in the village – was a paper figure for each member of the household. Under the guidance of the spirit medium and the temple staff, the villagers performed a series of rituals that shifted their inauspicious fate onto the scapegoats. The scapegoats were subsequently set ablaze some distance from the village, signifying the elimination of their tainted history. Afterwards, Lord Chi led an inspection through all the villagers' lands. His divine entourage made a stop at the site where the slain tree had stood. Villagers had already planted another tree (supposedly the offspring of the original) on the very site. To highlight the new tree's special status, villagers draped a strip of red cloth over the trunk. This folkloric convention is closely associated with *Dashugong*. Further rituals were conducted there, paper money burned, and firecrackers set off to conclude the ceremony of reconciliation. Thanks to his divine power, Lord Chi managed to appease the tree spirit and bring peace and security to the entire village.

⁴ Public construction often require clearing land or expanding roads. This can endanger old trees, which are sometimes transplanted. Without careful planning, transplanting can be fatal for old trees.

Let us look more closely at the event. Even though the tree had been dead for seven years, villagers still believed that its lingering resentment needed to be pacified. Murdering a large tree constitutes an act of desecration that deserves punishment. In addition, tree spirits occupy a relatively low place in the hierarchy of deities, enabling Lord Chi (or another higher-ranking deity, presumably) to settle the conflict between the tree and the village.

One should note that there is a slight distinction between a tree god and a tree spirit. The former, like many other officially recognised deities, is benevolent, omnipotent, reasonable, and caring. However, a tree spirit is typically unrecognised or receives little attention. People are rarely aware of its existence until something unusual happens. While a tree god should in theory live forever, a tree spirit can and does perish. It only manifests when it suffers a wound or premature death. This threatening side of the tree serves to evoke people's awe of nature (Qing 2016, 78-81). In response to harm, a tree spirit may inflict a punishment on the culprit. Given the history of tree god and tree spirit vengeance, it will be useful to consider it along with the environmental spirit that arose in Taiwan late in the twentieth century.⁵ In fact, many environmental protection groups or events choose to use the image of the tree as their icon. One of them has even become *Dashugong's* unlikely ally in the public sector.

6 Tree Folklore and Environmental Protection

In 1989, Taiwan's Department of Agriculture and Forestry launched a Precious Old Tree and Sidewalk Tree Protection Plan. For its purposes, a 'precious old tree' must meet at least one of the following three criteria: (1) over one hundred years old, (2) diameter at breast height more than 1.5 meters, (3) special species or locally representative species (Ministry of Forestry 2002). This may be the earliest legal act regulating and promoting the protection of old trees. That means that even if an old tree is not recognised as housing a tree god or tree spirit, so long as it has lived beyond one hundred years it is a cultural as well as an ecological treasure. As the protection of old trees entered the mainstream, the death of such a local legend no longer meant simple oblivion – it became something of concern, to be regretted. Possibly one of the earliest public memorial to an old tree occurred in 1994, when a large banyan inside a primary school died of old age. The county magistrate personally attended and presided over the memorial, along with nearly one thousand students,

⁵ The grassroots Taiwan Environmental Protection Union and official Ministry of Environmental Protection were both founded in 1987.

members of environment protection groups, teachers, and government officials. Over the course of the memorial, the messages conveyed were gratitude, remorse, and a resolution to work towards a harmonious coexistence with all creatures on earth (Bao 1994). In 2017, a pine tree in Hualian died after being poisoned by the landowner. This caused an uproar. In ways befitting the passing of a local dignitary, residents came to the site, placing candles and flowers to commemorate an august figure that had witnessed more than one hundred years of local change (Wang 2017).

Increasingly, people find solace after the loss of an old tree by planting its offspring in the same site (one thinks of Houzhen). This applies to both historical trees and tree gods (Liu 2016). Ostensibly a perpetuation of the tree's life, the practice offers an opportunity to promote ecological awareness. While the deification of an old tree is certainly one way to protect it, there are drawbacks. When people build shrines near trees, branches are unnaturally constrained, roots are buried underneath cement, and the plant may get insufficient water (Randrup, McPherson, Costello 2003, 210-15). Suppose sticks of incense are sold and heavily used: fire, high temperatures, and choking smoke can pose serious threats to the tree's health (Zhang 1993). As with human beings, when a tree grows too old, its health deteriorates, and its trunk is no longer able to support great masses of foliage. Diseases and pests may plague the weakening tree. That is why Zhan Fengchun, an arborist, maintains that planting new trees to replace old ones might be desirable (Lin 2021, 50-3).

Whether we choose to preserve old trees or plant young ones, ideas and beliefs surrounding *Dashugong* must have instilled in believers an inclination to respect and cherish aged banyans, maples, and other sorts of trees. That constitutes a common ground with nonbelievers who venerate old trees for their cultural and ecological value. In Taiwan, unfortunately, such a common ground is rarely seen. Followers of folk religions and environmentalists are often in opposing camps. As one side calls the other 'arrogant' and 'ignorant', the other speaks of environmental degradation. Lack of understanding on the part of the public sector leads to more misunderstanding and conflict. That is what happened with the ill-fated "Reduce Incense-Burning" 2017 campaign. The founders of that campaign hoped to improve air quality by stemming the burning of spirit money and incense in temples. However, overzealous officials triggered a terrific backlash. Believers in folk religions complained that their right to religious freedom was being infringed on. A coalition of temples staged a grand demonstration unprecedented in scale (Liu 2017). The conflict caused deep rifts between government and society. Other disagreements on analogous topics abound.

If civil servants took a crash course in local folklore, it would facilitate both policy-making and subsequent implementation. An en-

couraging example recently came to light of bureaucrats recognizing the legitimacy of popular religion. On the Facebook page of the Water Resource Planning Institute, a story about the Zengwen River was posted on November 8, 2022. One hundred years ago, as the bed of the river widened, it edged closer and closer to Shi'er dian Village. Those who lived there felt their livelihood was in danger, and they turned to their guardian god. The god instructed them to plant banyan trees on the riverbank to quell the threat of flooding. Those banyan trees have grown into a small forest, attracting a constant flow of tourists. Research carried out by the Water Resource Planning Institute indicates that there is scientific evidence supporting the wisdom of the local deity. Since banyans grow very swiftly, and their root systems latch firmly onto the soil, they protect riverbanks from erosion. A wall of trees could divert the water course away from the village. Such practices belong to folk knowledge of those in riverfront villages; they also conform to the "Nature-Based Solutions" advocated by UNESCO (Water Resource Planning Institute, 2022).

It is to be hoped that the further investigation and analysis of folk customs will enhance the mutual understanding of all parties, helping to bridge some of the gaps lying between them.

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