Talking (With) Trees: Arboreal Articulation and Poetics

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Talking (with) Trees

arboreal articulation and poetics

Abstract

Drawing on recent developments in critical plant studies, this essay attempts to develop an ethological poetics of trees. I start by analysing four examples of recent fiction, poetry and nonfiction that are each about different kinds of trees—*The Overstory* by Richard Powers; *Translations from Bark Beetle* by Jody Gladding; *Tree Talks* by Wendy Burk; *The Biggest Estate on Earth* by Bill Gammage—with relation to JC Ryan's phytocritical model. In addition to their representation of botanical lives, I also consider how Powers and Gammage understand trees as constitutive of Indigenous kinship networks. Then, I combine the insights gleaned from the textual analysis with work by Michael Marder and others in order to outline key features of tree ontology and articulation, and I conclude by positing a provisional arboreal poetics.

Keywords: critical plant studies, phytocriticism, ethological poetics, trees

This essay develops the focus on poetics in critical plant studies, particularly in terms of Australian and North American tree species. My analysis is based on acknowledgement of the great waves of violence wrought on New World territories by European colonisation, and by the concomitant erasure of Indigenous peoples' custodianship and sovereignty. On the Australian continent, for example, Anita Heiss and Peter Minter point out that, "just as the Crown's acquisition of 1770 had made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius*, it also made Aboriginal people *vox nullius*" (2008, 2). Within a few generations, two-thirds of pre-contact Aboriginal languages were made extinct, nations were dispossessed of their lands and their cultures were torn apart. Only the most reductive representation of this unfathomable devastation would ignore what was a continental silencing of not only human voices but also the webs of multispecies kin in which humans were entangled. All over the New Worlds, European colonisation reduced more-than-human semiosis to mere noise or lifeless background scenery, and Indigenous peoples were denigrated by virtue of their close associations with these wider webs of meaning. In the current contexts of new materialism and the environmental humanities, however, the more-than-human world is, to quote Vicky Kirby, "neither lacking nor primordial, but rather, a plenitude of possibilities, a cacophony of convers(at)ion." Furthermore, what was previously denigrated as primitive Nature is actually "that same force field of articulation, reinvention, and frisson that we are used to calling 'Culture'" (2011, 88). To embrace these propositions implies both recognition of the complexity and dynamism of cultures once thought to be as unchanging and unthinking as the landscapes in which Europeans encountered them, and also of the inextricable relationship between human sophistication on the one hand and a 'cacophony' of more-than-human expression on the other. However, while steps to recover the complexity of *animal* expressions are well advanced, more work is needed to overcome the Aristotelean division of plant from animal life, and to incorporate the emergent fields of phytosemiotics and critical plant studies into "a new and enlarged sense of 'cultural awareness'"

(Gagliano 2017, 96) that recognises all of the forms of articulation that abound throughout ecological systems.

In the Western metaphysical tradition, writes Michael Marder, "humans speak and reason but can fall into absurdity," and "animals have a voice without reason," but "plants have neither voice nor reason." While *vox nullius* is a powerful demonstration of the fact that logos is hardly allocated equally among human beings, Western metaphysics deprives animals of virtually any reason at all—animals have "the power of vocalization devoid of reason." Moreover, for plants "the exclusion appears to be absolute, rather than relative or partial, preventing them from latching on to any aspect of logos" (Marder 2017b, 367). Accordingly, in this essay I briefly consider some recent examples of fiction, poetry and nonfiction that are unique in their attempts to reposition plants as articulate subjects of, and even participants in, the act of literary composition and, therefore, the production of logos. Because each of the books selected deals primarily with trees, my associated discussion does not extend to consider other forms of botanical life in any detail. However, while each of these works does prioritise arboreal presence, their methods differ dramatically. Nonetheless, as a group these books constitute an emergent body of creative practice that explores innovative ways to articulate arboreal expression. Convergent with the flourishing, interdisciplinary field of critical plant studies, such literature asks key ontological and ethical questions of plant thinking: "How can we hear plants speak? What kind of ear is required to listen to their speech bereft of a voice or, at least, of one that would be recognizable and familiar to us?" (Marder 2017b, 367-8) Furthermore, under what conditions could we think about "a cross-kingdoms translation" between plant and animal thought? (Marder 2017a, 103) And, once we have learned how to recognise arboreal speech, how might we respond? Following on from my interest in 'ethological poetics' (eg. Cooke 2019), which prioritises practices of articulation and composition in non-human species, I conclude my enquiry into such questions with an attempt to develop a conceptual apparatus with which we might recognise tree poetics.

Talking Trees

There has never been a more urgent need to better understand the lives of our arboreal companions. As global forest cover continues to disappear at well-beyond-alarming rates, rampant capitalism makes so many of us complicit in the mass-slaughter of those myriad others who made this planet habitable in the first place. But even as we destroy them, trees remain vital interlocutors for understanding climate change. A telling example comes from Alaska and Siberia, where what scientists call 'drunken forests' are losing their footing in the thawing permafrost "and being thrown completely off balance in the mushy subsoil." Understanding why the forest looks like "a group of drunks staggering around" allows the educated observer to *read* climate change (Wohlleben 2016, 40-1). But tree poetics is about much more than simply using trees as measuring instruments for anthropogenic climatic impacts; rather, it invites an exploration into tree ontology and, as in Marder's work, phenomenology. For Marder, trees and other plants are central to multispecies thinking: they "are the first living bridges between the elements that, thanks to them, become liveable for animals and humans" (Marder 2017a, 120). Like Marder, JC Ryan draws on recent botanical research into plant signalling, cognition and behaviour in order to illustrate the ways in which plants "destabilize human exceptionalism" (Ryan 2020, 102). Ryan is most interested in literature that allows for plant expressions to be recovered from the background scenery in which they are too often hidden; my readings of the following texts are indebted to his important critical advances. What all of these approaches highlight is that human attention is much less than comprehensive: different kinds of attention highlight different aspects of plant worlds, and sometimes in ways that are extremely problematic.

While animal communication displays features that are often eye- and ear-catching for humans, plant communication occurs mostly beyond the limits of our perception, whether in the release of airborne substances or in the transition zone of the root apex, for example (Marder

2013, 4). Rather than passive, mute and unthinking, phytosemantics research indicates that plants actually have what we could call voices. Different plants produce specific sound signatures that can be interpreted and acted upon by other organisms, including other members of that species (Ryan 2020, 115). Crucially, however, plant sounds are but part of a complex, multi-modal communicative array including visual, electrical and chemical cues.[1] For example, Monica Gagliano describes how plants write effervescently in the air with "a rich and complex bouquet of several thousand volatile chemicals"; just "a single scented word" can have multiple meanings depending on its intended recipients (2017, 90). At the same time, plants are also "capable of conveying sophisticated information about both past and future events" (Karban 2017, 17). Increasingly, writes Richard Karban, we are finding that such cues "exhibit many of the characteristics that linguists require of language" (2017, 3). Plants may also perceive a wider range of environmental signals, and with greater sensitivity, than many animals (Trewavas in Marder 2012, 1368); analysis of vegetal movement, in turn, indicates that plants are conscious of, and respond intelligently to, these signals (Ryan 2018, 4). "Rather than an automaton reacting to external stimuli in a generally predetermined fashion," concludes Ryan, "the 'intelligent plant' integrates aspects of communication, sensing and emergence into its ontological bearing" (2018, 5). It would be a mistake, therefore, "to conjecture that vegetal self-expression is a less-complex, if not a primitive, form of language and, therefore, of being." Nevertheless, the world of plants remains opaque because, Marder argues, writers and scholars "tend to translate it, without further ado, into the ideal medium of semantic articulation" (2017a, 123).

Consequently, this essay is preoccupied both with examples of literature that attempt to account for the languages of plants—trees in particular—and also with trying to deduce, from both the literary examples included here, as well as from current investigations in critical plant studies, exactly how we might begin to describe a complex, arboreal poetics. For the first part of my discussion, I use the phytocritical model developed by Ryan. Based on acknowledging the plant "as a cognitive entity that is able to behave, decide, feel, learn, and remember" (Ryan 2018, 11), phytocriticism focuses on the agencies of botanical beings in literary texts, "and considers how plants are rendered, evoked, mediated, or brought to life in and through language" (Ryan 2018, 14). Of course, means of evocation and mediation in literature are at once multifarious, problematic and productive. By way of illustration, each of the primary texts discussed in the first part of this essay confronts a different, critical problem with the phytocritical focus: 1) an expansive imagination in a botanical sense might nevertheless be indicative of other kinds of historical and ontological narrowness (*The Overstory*); 2) the presence of trees in human texts can indicate their resistance as opposed to their collaboration (*Translations from Bark Beetle*); 3) when texts give trees the space to speak, what results might be untranslatable (*Tree Talks*); 4) if we acknowledge the potential for tree expression, how might we respond to it as part of a decolonial ecological literacy? (*The Biggest Estate on Earth*)

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[1] For discussion of a similarly complex, multi-modal communicative system in ants, see (Cooke 2020).

As will become apparent, within the sphere of phytocritical practice I have two loci of particular interest. Firstly, while trying to remain attentive to arboreal lives in the texts that follow, I also want to point out how the will to be inclusive of certain beings can inadvertently present the human imagination with ethical problems, particularly in the case of *The Overstory* but elsewhere as well. Secondly, I am extremely interested in the presence of plant agency in human texts but, as part of my aforementioned theorisation of ethological poetics, I am perhaps chiefly concerned with how we might understand aspects of tree expression as moments of poetics in their own right. Where a scientific ethology would notate the regularities, predictabilities, and consistencies in a tree's behaviour, an ethological poetics is interested in the impact of the tree's expression, or its "capacity to catalyse relation" (Cooke 2019, 303). In other words: there are human texts about trees, and they can certainly be informative, even transformative; but there are also the texts that trees themselves make, and we might try to think—however provisionally—about their beauty, complexity and/or meaning. The aim here is to disperse literacy and textuality so that all kinds of organisms "become subjects of cognitive and agential entanglement and observational intention" (Kirby 2011, ix-x).

***The Overstory* and Authorial In/attentiveness**

Richard Powers's 2018 novel *The Overstory* is a commanding study in the power of attention. In entwining the lives of its characters with arboreal archetypes, companions and guides, the novel seeks to expand the compass of fiction to include botanical, as well as animal, life. Structured according to an abstracted blueprint of a tree, the novel proceeds by weaving together the various 'roots' of its opening section, which is composed of eight separate short stories, each with a focus on the significance of different kinds of trees in the lives of the protagonists. As we move into the book's second section, 'Trunk', the characters' lives start to converge. In 'Crown', parts of this convergence flourish while others violently combust. Despite the tragedies of this penultimate section, the book provides sober possibilities for hope in the final section, 'Seeds'. There isn't space to explore the details of each character's story here; rather, what I want to introduce is the significant steps the novel takes towards an imagination of vegetal being.

In expanding the compass of fiction, *The Overstory* also seeks a concomitant transformation in our moral compass. "I happen to believe that collectively, we humans are deeply, deliriously deranged," Powers says, "and that only a profound shift in consciousness and institutions regarding the significance and standing of nonhumans will keep us viable…" (quoted in Rose 2018, 19). Indeed, early on in 'Roots', a similar, though darker, sentiment is articulated by Adam, one of the book's main characters: "Humankind is deeply ill," he says, "The species won't last long. It was an aberrant experiment." Hope, for Adam as for Powers, is to be found elsewhere, with "the healthy intelligences, the collective ones. Colonies and hives." (Powers 2019, 70) As here, various moments in the novel introduce us to the communal properties of tree ecologies—to the ways in which, to quote Peter Wohlleben, "forests are superorganisms with interconnections much like ant colonies" (2016, 3). But perhaps the more concerted thrust of *Overstory* is towards a multitudinous conception of more-than-human life. As a child, for example, Adam marvels at how there are more lives in the canopy of his favourite maple than there are people in his town (65). "*People aren't the apex species they think they are*," another character, Patricia, is told by her father, "Other creatures… call the shots, make the air, and eat sunlight. Without them, *nothing*." (356, emphasis in original)

Here, in this expanded, biocentric vision, *The Overstory* gestures towards "something so different from human intelligence that intelligence thinks it's nothing" (67). At times, the novel even seems to open onto the possibility that other kinds of language—not human, not even animal—might permeate the spaces of fiction, and suggest radically alternative methods of writing (and reading)—the trunks of oaks, for example, with their "strange, irregular, lobed shapes… like the letters of an alphabet from outer space, each glyph shaped by something that looks for all the world like a deliberation." But if the *Overstory* shies away from trying to re-present or read such language, it nevertheless acknowledges it as "text… written by a thing with five hundred million root tips" (83). From here, the novel attempts occasional, revelatory forays into tree interpretation. "*A tree is a passage between earth and sky*," Adam reads in an unnamed book (66, emphasis in original), a concept which echoes one of Marder's, for whom plants produce, through gravitropism, "the first orientational differentiation into environmental space, imposing a meaningful grid onto it and transforming it into a place or a habitat" (2012, 1367). But the phrase also prefigures the gradual emergence of a kind of speculative ethology[2] in *Overstory*, which ventures to understand trees' cosmic, even sacred, significance:

> A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttling the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility from out of nothing: the most perfect piece of self-writing code that [Neelay's] eyes could hope to see. (129)

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[2] I am using the term 'speculative ethology' after Matthew Chrulew, who convened a series of symposia on the topic at Curtin University, Perth, between 2016 and 2019. Speculative ethology denotes a richer, more imaginative understanding of more-than-human lives than traditional ethology.

However, while *The Overstory* integrates these insights into a series of diverse and compelling narratives, it cannot overcome a problem that is central to the development of the novel form itself. This problem consists in the fact that, as a work of fiction, *The Overstory* relies upon and remains anchored in the lives, and lifeworlds, of its human characters. As such, it is not really a novel *about* trees per se—or, to use Ryan's words, about the ways in which trees "write their own lives" (2020, 99). Going yet further, Jason Childs suggests that the novel is illustrative of "our fixation upon narrative, [and] our naturalisation of its teleology," which "may itself be a key element of our ecological unwinding" (2018, np). So, although the book has attracted all manner of praise for its 'exhilarating', 'extraordinary' and 'breathtaking' insights, the novel's impact on the deeper bedrock of the form and possibilities of the genre is perhaps more modest. But Powers is hardly alone in this regard; the list of English-language novels about nonhuman animal lives (to say nothing of plants) is alarmingly short. According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, fiction

> with its traditional emphasis on plot, character and psychological states, has been seen perforce as being focused on individuals or groups of humans, or at least anthropomorphised animals… And while literature has certainly dealt with the fates and even the psychologies of animals, these have—at least until recently—been highly anthropomorphised, acting more often than not as a staple of fiction for children rather than adult readers. For western writers, at least, it has been more difficult to anthropomorphise the environment which, far from having its own providential fortunes and narrative trajectories, has been regarded as a mere backdrop against which human lives are played out… Similarly, potential emphasis on the importance of animal [and plant] subjects—the death of a pet, disease in a sheep flock—tends to focus attention on the *human* reaction to such loss or losses. (2010, 16-7)

Still, while these are important concerns, one might object that they need to be weighed against the potential impact that such a work—in which human lives are completely marginalised—

might have. Perhaps, in order to make the lives of trees more compelling to the vast majority of his readers, Powers *needed* to graft their lifeworlds onto those of human characters. Indeed, given the remarkable reception of the novel—it won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize, was shortlisted for the Man Booker in 2018, and spent months as a paperback bestseller (Arac 2019, 137)—it would appear that the strategy was a success. In order to insinuate their lives into the minds of as many readers as possible, Powers found a useful compromise between the privileging of tree worlds, and stories that would engage a public still largely oblivious to such worlds.

Nevertheless, regardless of one's stance on such issues, the focus of the novel remains problematic in other ways, and for reasons that are based on a set of principles with a substantially longer history of scholarship than the relatively recent developments in critical plant studies. As Jonathan Arac points out regarding a section of *The Overstory* set in the Brazilian Amazon, many of the landscape features that Powers makes prominent—the abundant profusion of biomass, including hundreds of tree species, plant species, insects, seeds, orchids, ferns and so on—"are not the signs of a virgin forest but… can be shown to result from [I]ndigenous people's purposeful activity" (2019, 143). To be clear, the novel does acknowledge the Indigenous history of the Americas, and Powers does recognise in general terms the intimate, human-plant relationships of pre-colonial America. But in an attempt to prioritise—and to recover—the immediacy of arboreal encounter, the novel elides the wider multispecies webs in which trees have existed long before European colonisation, including diverse, specific, Indigenous ways of knowing and speaking of plants. Due to Powers's preoccupation with dissolving anthropocentric understandings of life into "a vastly larger scale" of biodiversity (477), the crucial particularities of local histories, ecologies and Indigenous worlds are often ignored in *The Overstory.* As I outlined at the start of this essay, colonialist ignorance of the liveliness of more-than-human semiosis is inseparable from the devastation and destruction of Indigenous human semiosis; to focus on one at the expense of the other is to risk minimising the full extent of the violence of modernity.

Repeatedly and almost without exception, however, Powers refers to Indigenous knowledges without reference to the cultures to which they belong. Instead, the novel makes casual reference to “[I]ndigenous fisherman” (272), “hunter-gatherers” (573) or, yet more problematically, reduces Indigenous presence to little more than a ghostly absence behind nameless “native languages” (168). In what is perhaps the most alarming instance of such erasure, one of the novel’s main characters, a maverick tree scientist named Patricia, stands by a cedar tree and addresses it “using the words of the forest’s first humans” (170). Reminiscent, perhaps, of some of the darker episodes of postcolonial poetics—think, for example, of Pablo Neruda’s determination to speak for the “dead mouths” of [very much alive] Indigenous Andeans in his famous poem, ‘Alturas de Macchu Picchu’ (see Cooke 2013, 73-114)—here Patricia literally appropriates an Indigenous language while simultaneously obscuring the actual people to whom it belongs. In other words, in privileging and honouring the cedar tree, Powers summarily excises its human kin from view. Indeed, earlier on, we encounter what seems to be a digital metaphor for the colonialist ‘overstory’ of the novel’s imagination, when programming prodigy Neelay creates a hit video game that involves “conquistadores ravaging the *virgin* Americas” (135, emphasis added). Towards the end of the book, Neelay’s vision is realised as a vast swarm of artificial intelligence—algorithmic bots or “learners” that “comb the Earth… [a]bsorb everything” and devour “every scrap of data” available (614).

While the purpose of Neelay’s algorithms is ostensibly to learn how the earth speaks, and to deduce “what life wants from people,” this grand opera of global surveillance and unmediated knowledge supplants a much quieter and arguably more poignant scene (614). Here, the only living, talking Indigenous character in *The Overstory* has an active role. A few pages earlier, he had emerged from the forest, as if from nowhere, to watch one of the novel’s primary characters, a young artist named Nick, start to construct a large sculpture from the available material on the forest floor. The man starts to help with Nick’s assemblage, and the next day he returns with two younger men, who also join in. As if aware of the unspoken undercurrent that spans much of *The*

Overstory, Powers uses this man to articulate the crucial history that frames the arboreal reveries at the emotional core of the novel: when Nick expresses amazement at how much the trees around him have to say, the man chuckles and says, "We've been trying to tell you that since 1492" (613). However, while this is an important scene—split over various pages, it actually becomes the last of the whole novel—it is also necessary to point out that in it nothing changes with regards to Powers's representation of Indigenous people or their knowledges. 'The man', after all, is only ever referred to as such; he has no name and, while he speaks a few words of "a language so old it sounds like stones tossed in a brook" (612), we never see the name of this language, read words of it, or learn anything of the man's ongoing connection to the forest which Nick is using—without having asked permission—to create his artwork. Consequently, despite the novel's many, significant achievements, as a whole it doesn't present a genuinely decolonial, multispecies plenitude. As such, it risks perpetuating basic features of colonial power—namely, the obfuscation of local, cultural ecologies in favour of a grander, more global vision.[3]

Translating Poetics

Although the scope of *Overstory* is dramatic, nearly epic, it is limited by a focus on human, non-Indigenous characters. The strictures of this focus might be brought into yet starker relief when compared to recent experiments in contemporary poetry. Jody Gladding's *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014b), for instance, features speculative translations of bark beetles' engravings in trees.[4] Ostensibly, the book is about the markings of the bark beetles, but there is much of interest to critical plant studies as well: if the beetles' engravings are the focus of Gladding's translations, the materiality of beetle expression—its manifestation in the trunks of a variety of North American tree species—is also an important feature of the book, because the texture and density of each trunk has a profound influence on each engraving. Both arboreal *and* beetle expression, therefore, are translated into a variety of forms. On the one hand, the book transforms trees into negative space, which is an inversion of the beetles' original engravings, their sinuous, negative spaces carved through the wood of the trees. As a result, the trees' trunks surround each poem as blank space, often pushing lines to the left or right, so that the poems rarely remain anchored to the left margin. On the other hand, arboreal presence is rendered almost photographically, with various reproductions of Gladding's graphite rubbings of the beetle's glyphs: around and amidst the beetles' white, worming nets, the reproductions reveal the darker, grainier presence of the wood. In *Bark Beetle*, therefore, "the vibrant materiality" of the trees becomes "the substratum for polylingualism in human and more-than-human worlds" (Ryan 2020, 110).

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[3] My argument here runs somewhat counter to Ursula Heise's seminal *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. In Heise's terms, *The Overstory* may be a very successful attempt "to shift the core" of the environmental imagination "from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet" (2008, 56).

[4] For a more extensive reading of this book with relation to animal and insect poetics, see Keller (2017, 162-8).

This confluence of beetle and arboreal agencies also recalls Brian Massumi's introduction to Deleuzo-Guattarian materialism in *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. From the perspective of the beetle, the tree's wood is a material. But from the perspective of the forces that combined to form it, the tree "is an expression, of the water, sunlight, and carbon dioxide it contains, of the genetic potential it did or did not pass on" (Massumi 1992, 12). That is, material in one situation can become expression in another. In this sense, *Translations from Bark Beetle* is indicative of a vegetal ecopoetics theorised by Ryan, where the poem produces

> a dynamic sphere in which the lively plant activates and contributes to the process of poetization and, thereafter, remains as a corporeal trace within the poetic substratum. Rather than a reproduction or reconstitution of the vegetal form in the human mind, the poem conceived of as such embodies a dialectical back-and-forth between the lyrical exertions of the versifier and the autonomy of the vegetal presence inhabiting the work. (2018, 8-9)

Still, if arboreal presence and intention can be detected in *Translations*, its role is secondary to the bark beetles'. Furthermore, the beetle inscriptions themselves are tremendously violent—not so much because of their small incisions in tree bodies, but because bark beetles en masse are responsible for disastrous amounts of arboreal death, as Gladding herself explains in an interview:

> In western North America, bark beetle infestations are killing off the lodgepole pines. They spread Dutch elm disease by transmitting the fungus from dead to living trees. They're an important part of the decay process, but they can do serious damage to forests. (2014a)

In this light, tree expression in *Bark Beetle*, rather than part of an exciting, interspecies collaboration, might be read instead as an act of resistance, stoppage, refusal: the white spaces around the texts are saying, "you shall not pass!"

In addition to *Translations from Bark Beetle*, there is a wide range of examples of complicated, multispecies entanglements in twentieth and twenty-first century poetry. Aaron Moe's *Zoopoetics* (2014) showed how an attentiveness to non-human species has produced remarkable formal and stylistic innovations in North American poetry in particular for more than a century. But while non-human voices, be they plant or animal, find extraordinary expression in books like Les Murray's *Translations from the Natural World* (1992), the presence of the non-human in poetry need not be made explicit, or its expression crystallised in coherent grammars of alphabetic writing. Indeed, given the impact of *The Overstory*, a novel with a clear determination to remain anchored by human concerns, we could argue that what is needed, before we are ready for the natural world to be translated, is recognition that such translation is *possible*. Wendy Burk's *Tree Talks* (2016) is a notable example in this regard. Structured as a series of interviews with particular trees across Southern Arizona, Burk asks each of her arboreal subjects a set of starkly prosaic questions ("Do the dogs bark at all times of the day?" she asks a velvet mesquite in Tuscon, "Do you get used to it?" [49]) and then provides elaborate transcriptions of the responses. But these encounters, and the resultant transcriptions, do not flourish into what a human reader could interpret as intelligible semiosis. Rather, Burk's interviews produce a growing absence at the heart of the book, as it becomes increasingly apparent that, indeed, trees *don't* talk—at least, not in any way that is familiar to us.

Crucially, however, rather than nullifying the trees' presence in an imposed silence, Burk renders the possibility of their talking more *likely*. Her transcriptions account for all kinds of peripheral noise, human and otherwise, while the trees themselves remain tantalisingly on the edge of written language, their responses rendered non-alphabetically with different arrangements of diacritical marks such as slashes, open brackets, commas and colons. Burk's typographical arrays are extremely open, too, producing a hybrid, audio-visual complex: pages are marked with horizontal and vertical repetitions of different sounds, and with clusters of differently sized fonts. As Ryan notes, the poems' "glyph-like patterns" are evocative of the inscriptions of plant neuroactivity on the plates of Jagadish Chandra Bose's crescographs—early twentieth century experiments that attempted to reveal in script form the interior worlds of plants (2020, 111). Michael Gessner adds that the arrays of marks "suggest the inability of semiotics to decode environmental systems," or that they may even point to "the postconceptual", where a reassessment of anthropocentric understandings of 'communication' might be required. Here, "the primacy of human language… serves only to resist, if not reject" our more-than-human entanglements (Gessner 2016, np). *Tree Talks* is thus an important reminder that, following Marder, in order to hear plants speak, we must leave room for the untranslatable in our practices of translation (Marder 2017a).

For Gessner, and for many in critical plant and animal studies as well, the *existence* of other species' languages, beyond our capacity to discern their meanings, may be "as vital as the *act* of communication itself"; the cacophony of a multi-lingual/-species world might first require listening and recognition before any sustained communication can take place (2016, np, emphasis in original). Like I said above, central to all such cacophony in *Tree Talks* is the ongoing fact of the trees' silence but, as we move through the book, slowly this silence starts to acquire an ineluctable density: as Burk continues to ask questions, and as the trees continue to respond (or ignore) with non-semantic gestures, the poems form homes for what these gestures—these commas, open brackets and colons—*might* mean. That silent 'void' in each poem becomes, in the Nietzschean sense, productive: it is the catalyst for a reorientation of understanding. What the poems produce, in other words, is a field in which a conversation with trees becomes possible or, as Ryan points out, "predicated on a willingness to negotiate vegetal ontologies," *Tree Talks* remains "open to the potential for moments of interspecies breakthrough" (2020, 112). For Linda Russo, too, Burk's poems are moments of exchange, which reach beyond "the limits of ego-centricism… to materialize a relation that is not ultimately human-centered." The book cultivates a "sensory-intellectual porousness," where thinking is 'stretched' to the limits of sensory perception, thereby expanding "bodily boundaries" even as they are erased, or rewritten (Russo 2015, np).

Decolonial Responses

If *Tree Talks* takes us to the interface of human and tree, and thereby suggests an entry into a world of autopoietic expression that is "enacted by—rather than imposed on—[plants] as agents in the world" (Ryan 2020, 103), the next step might be to consider how to engage with plant expression, or how we might enter into relation(s) with it. If we recognise the capacity for plants to articulate themselves, and if, thanks to poets like Burk, we have begun to sketch out possibilities for how such articulations might be read, how are we to respond, if it turns out that, at times, a response is required? One such example might be Bill Gammage's *Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011), an historical tome which combines archival research with Aboriginal knowledges, geography and ecological science to dramatically revise understandings of pre-colonial Australian ecosystems, and to outline powerful implications for the future of Australian ecological management. Specifically, *The Biggest Estate* argues that, prior to European colonisation, what we now think of as 'Australia' was an impossibly large estate of interconnected grasslands, pathways and open woodlands—all of which were systematically managed by Indigenous nations across the continent. Once Aboriginal people were removed from their lands, Country became overgrown—or 'wild' to use Deborah Bird Rose's term (2004)—and vulnerable to the megafires that now tear through much of the continent with frightening regularity. Alongside extensive archival research, the book's argument rests on the evidence presented in the second chapter, 'Canvas of a Continent'.

In 'Canvas of a Continent', Gammage literally reads trees—both their representation in colonial-era paintings, and also the trees that remain (or have proliferated) in the present-day locations of those paintings. Thus, 'Canvas of a Continent' presents us with a variety of spectacular arboreal characters who articulate themselves in myriad, meaningful ways. The result is a magnificent, continental assemblage of tree poetics, where plants—mostly eucalypts—are presented "as historians, recording their past" (19). "Light shapes eucalyptus," Gammage writes at one point, "In shade they grow straight, on a shade edge they bend and branch to the light, in light they spread. A eucalypt's shape is thus a history of its surrounds" (21). By reading the shapes and forms of his subjects, Gammage can determine not only a tree's age, but whether or not it has grown up in a forest that has since been destroyed, or if it has grown on a grassy plain that was once managed by fire. He can also provide insight into a tree's experience of bushfire, drought and other traumas. Part of Gammage's skill involves understanding each tree as a subject who is always becoming, or as a form of cognition that is slowly proceeding beyond the narrow window of human perception. Consequently, the ghostly shapes of dead trees also start to reveal themselves as part of a slow, meticulous dance of light and shadow:

> Adjacent eucalypts lean different ways to dodge the shade of neighbours. You can 'see' those neighbours after they're gone: smaller trees lean from the site. If the light moves, for example if a neighbour grows, trees gyrate from the shadow, if necessary reversing 180 degrees, except for balance starving branches which fall into the shade and unleash new branches into the light. (22)

In *The Biggest Estate*, then, each tree is not static or passive but, to use a phrase of Ryan's, "a mutable, intelligent phenomenon capable of writing its own life through its own bodily articulations" (2020, 109).

Indeed, at times Gammage is even able to identify life in what appears to be an image of death. "Many eucalypts have a remarkable capacity," he writes, "their bark heals their wounds and revives trees apparently dead." In one example, he presents a ribbon gum by a settler's hut that had been lopped and left to die. It is hard not to interpret what happened next as a powerful anti-colonial allegory: after the settler abandoned the hut, the ribbon gum revived. In Gammage's photo we can see that a lignotuber now grows beside it, and

> bark is re-clothing the old trunk. In time, a long time, bark and branch will conceal the scars as though they never were. Some eucalypts are much older than we imagine. (29)

In such a manner, Gammage's careful, ecologically informed readings allow the trees and other plant life to speak *back* against dominant, European representations of the Australian landscape. Iconic paintings by settler artists like Arthur Streeton "declared the colour of Australia" by depicting landscapes with devastated native ecologies that were overrun with invasive species (34). Instead, Gammage's analysis reveals the persistence—rather than the death—of lifeways of native plant and animal species, and prioritises Indigenous land management practices as central to their re-flourishing.

The Biggest Estate shows, among many other things, how eucalyptus trees respond differently to events of light, drought and fire. Understanding these responses has allowed Indigenous peoples across the continent to use fire to distribute different trees in different ways, and to regulate animal populations. Such knowledge is crucial for a decolonial topography, too: with it, we can read Indigenous occupation in formerly silenced landscapes by detecting unusual plant patterns, "hence the effects of controlled fire as distinct from bushfire, and so the presence of Aboriginal management" (19). Further on, Gammage concludes, "To burn patterns so complex in terrain so varied needs intricate knowledge of plants and fire, visionary planning, and skill and patience greater than anything modern Australia has imagined" (43). Trees are speaking here—Gammage could never have arrived at such profound conclusions without their help—of a long, complex history that has been devastated by European invasion, but which is still persistently present, and of which it is possible to learn. Indeed, Gammage's "innovative thinking and investigation" (Pascoe 2014, 116) became central to Bruce Pascoe's paradigm-shifting *Dark Emu*, which has transformed popular understandings of Australian history by arguing that Aboriginal people across the continent were *not* 'hunter-gatherers' or wandering nomads, but utilised a wide variety of agricultural practices, including the domestication of plants, sowing, harvesting and irrigation.[5]

As I have indicated already, trees, along with other plants, are inextricable from totemic networks of kin relationships across First Nations cultures. Gaagudju man Bill Neidje argues that plants and humans are blood relatives: "your blood / it's in this earth / same as for tree" (quoted in Hall 2014, 390).[6] In these contexts, writes Stephen Muecke, "there is a structure in place, reinforced by ceremony, in which trees and humans are not only mixed up with each other, but are destined and designed to care for each other" (2018, 43). Trees are often sacred sites that mark the transformation of an ancestral being into arboreal form. In turn, because of their shared origins in the Dreaming, plants share kinship with humans (Hall 2014, 388). In Rose's words, "Dreaming trees and people go along together, generation after generation" (2008, 160). But in the context of landscapes that have been ravaged by European invasion of Aboriginal lands—with an ethos best summed up, for Rose, by the motto, "if it moves shoot it, if it doesn't move chop it down" (2008, 160)—Aboriginal peoples' connections to trees have been repeatedly harmed and severed. Rose writes of a particularly traumatic episode from northern Australia, where people from the Yarralin community were working on a former cattle station and were ordered to chop down some Dreaming trees. According to one of the workers, Daly Pulkara, "the trees screamed when the axe went into them, and… [shortly after] the men who did the chopping died off one by one in quick succession." Later, Pulkara and Rose were shocked to discover that another stand of Dreaming trees had been recently chopped down. Rose recounts:

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[5] Pascoe cites the importance of Gammage's research in the Acknowledgments section of *Dark Emu*, p. 9.

[6] Neidje's point corresponds with contemporary biology, which recognises that plants and animals share many of the same genes. EYA genes, for example, are present in both plants and animals, though they are used differently by different species.

> Daly stood looking at the fallen trees, and gazing around at the country that had been witnessing all this. 'It hurts people's feelings,' he said…'You hurt me,' he said [speaking of the perpetrators], 'you take my power away.'

The trees were Pulkara's "kin and his responsibility"; for Rose, "he was seeing the deaths of cherished others, trees and people" (2008, 161). Shortly after this episode Pulkara had a stroke and lost much of his speech. Before the stroke, he amplified his critique of the destruction into a story of colonisation across the whole continent:

> We'll run out of history, because Whitefellas fuck the Law up, and they're knocking all the power out of this country. (quoted in Rose 2008, 162)

In worlds like Pulkara's, then, trees store not only carbon, but history, too. Similarly, for Joy Harjo, a Muscogee Creek Native American poet, plants and trees "all have their / tribes, their families, their histories." It is therefore our responsibility to "[t]alk to them, / listen to them. They are alive poems." (2002, 42) Harjo's entreaty is emblematic of practices that resist "the 'dehumanization of plants'" not by spuriously personifying them, but "by embracing them as kin" (Ryan 2018, 20). "In sovereign Aboriginal and First Nations poetry and poetics," argues Minter, "the figure of the tree is always connected, complex, embedded, and immanent in networks of relation" (2021, 67). If non-Indigenous people can reencounter trees as similarly "non-negotiable, open-ended dialogical partners" (Rose 2008, 165), we might start to recover other arboreal entanglements. Following on from Ryan's phytographic model, the imperative is not only to listen to, or to work with, plants, but also to remain "vigilant to their *writing-back*"—those many inscriptions in which plants articulate their lives, "regardless of our textual or linguistic intercessions" (2020, 116). This is not to overlook the various practical and conceptual difficulties involved. For instance, considerable theorisation is required to address the problem of translation between such extraordinarily different forms of communication. "How can humans learn to hear or enhance our receptivity," asks Jane Bennett, "for 'propositions' not expressed in words?" (2010, 104) Fortunately, considerable theorisation has already taken place, which I will briefly outline in what follows. In the context of an ethological poetics, insights from critical plant studies allow us to trace out some of the conceptual apparatus with which we might recognise and provisionally interpret the poetics of trees.

"Nonverbal, ecological, and corporeal voice" (Gagliano et al, 2017, xxvii): toward a tree poetics

For Marder, "redrawing the boundaries of what is called speech" does not involve simply including beings that were previously considered voiceless "within the concentric circles surrounding an expanded notion of the voice" (2017b, 368). Here, the danger would be that the centrality of human voice (and voices in general) would be maintained. "The assumption that to have a language is to be able to speak is both erroneous and unethical," he argues. The premise of this assumption is "thoroughly anthropocentric," in that it pairs all linguistic phenomena with the voice, which only humans possess, of course, "and grants other creatures the right to speak only on the condition that they ventriloquize quasi-, proto-, or post-human voices" (2017a, 113). But it is not necessary to have an organ for vocalisation in order to have language (2017a, 118). To avoid this assumption, Marder prefers to think in terms of 'articulation':

> To articulate is to join things in space, as well as to render them into words; to put together and make contiguous, as well as to express and vocalize. Its operations destabilize the difference between the ideal and the material… (2017b, 368)

Between the ideal and the material, between the earth and the sky, plants join disparate realms by means of articulation. Thus, the question

> 'Who speaks?' elliptically inquires: Who speaks with what? Who articulates by means of a voice? Who resorts to a speech that, though voiceless, is no less articulate and articulated in its reliance on spatial jointures? (2017b, 368)

A plant speaks, therefore, by articulating in response to others—sunlight, water, insects, herbivores. "It speaks by articulating itself in the place of its growth," through roots and branches, through "open-ended and infinitely replicated multiplicities of 'morphological structures'" (Marder 2017b, 368). For Marder, articulation isn't necessarily about *communication*—i.e. about the transference of semantic packages from one body to another—but rather is a form of embodied speaking: "a plant speaks with and as its body," insofar as it "gets in touch better, more thoroughly, with the world around as it grows." This is why vegetal being constitutes "speech without voice" or "logos without logos" (2017b, 368).

Far from signalling a lack, however, an element of voicelessness is actually the most fundamental element of speaking. No articulation, human, arboreal or otherwise, "is in a position to articulate logos (articulation) as such and as a whole" (Marder 2017b, 368-9), because all forms of articulation occur within material and discursive limits:

> 'Who' speaks always limits the range, content, form, tone, rhythm, and modulations of the speaking that ensues. But in the absence of this enabling limitation there is no speech whatsoever. We should thus not hear in the vegetal logos without logos the deficiency and privation it has been linked to throughout

> the history of Western thought. The plant's speech without voice is the positive limit of expression. (Marder 2017b, 369)

What the plant's speech should alert us to, therefore, is a far broader range of expression and possibilities for articulation. With its "silent logos" that interweaves with "phenomenal surfaces… in an uninterrupted unity," the plant illustrates "the principle of material living expression as such, demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself" (Marder 2017a, 121-2). We are approaching, therefore, "the language of life," to use Kirby's words, or "an in-formational bio-logy whose involvements have little respect for species division, even though they produce them" (2011, 41). For Gagliano, too, language is a fundamentally natural and inevitable phenomenon "that emerges as an organism makes meaning of its surroundings," and, in turn, "engraves" its identity and its physicality into the world (2017, 94). Re-orienting Derrida's complication of textuality, Kirby argues that we should begin "with an original (worldly) writing through whose radical interiority the referent *presents* itself" (emphasis in original). Consequently, Marder's 'vegetal logos without logos' is related to what Kirby calls 'presentment', or the expression of "the energetics of an originary unfolding" (2011, 46).

In an effort to imagine something of this 'originary unfolding', I want to conclude this essay with a provisional account of tree poetics. What does this silent, articulating logos-without-logos do? Or, what linguistic or conceptual tools do we have available that might resonate with such logos? We might begin with acknowledgement of trees' non-phonetic, multispecies inscription, or the marks they write in biochemical substances for transmission to other plants and animals (Marder 2017a, 119). Amidst the wide range of this diffusion, 'multi' becomes a pivotal prefix; here we can think too of trees' multi-directionality, their branches bifurcating, trifurcating in every possible direction, their twisting and turning into all manner of possible forms.[7] This is part of what Marder calls their "dispersed intentionality," where each shoot, root and branch "pursues its own trajectory of intentionality" in response to unevenly distributed resources. Rather than a limited organismic model which idealises the integration of an animal body, then, the tree is an exemplar of "modular development" with remarkable "behavioural plasticity." The key is their active meristems, "capable of growing into organs of undetermined characteristics" (Marder 2012, 1370). But this dispersed intentionality should not signify some kind of permanently frenzied distraction. Instead, the tree's is a "hyper-attention", where every shoot, leaf and rootlet "monitors the minutest environmental variations proximate to it." Far from a deficiency, this is a "non-totalized intelligence" equivalent to "a parallel processing model, with every organ of intentionality playing the role of parallel processor." Moreover, in contrast to the animal organism, "with its total aggregation of parts subjugated to the demands of the whole", the plant's dispersion of attention and intention "betokens the dispersion of life itself" (Marder 2012, 1370).

For Marder, these dispersed, parallel intelligences disrupt a number of longstanding Western intellectual biases. Firstly, tree intelligence is not concentrated in a single organ; secondly, tree behaviour cannot be separated from the context in which it is elicited:

> Unlike the presumably context-free abstract rationality [of Western thought], plant intelligence is as context-dependent as the sessile plant itself. Its decentralized structure means that, besides being non-

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[7] My principal interlocutor for these final paragraphs was a Poinciana (*Delonix regia*) in orange-red blossom, located by the banks of the Brisbane River at the end of Merthyr Road in New Farm, on Juggerah country. Despite the valuable assistance of the Poinciana, however, these comments are not meant to refer to a particular tree. While I appreciate phytocriticism's emphasis on individual plants, and share Ryan's related concern regarding "the marginalization of individual botanical lives" (2020, 98), I am also wary of how this emphasis might intersect with neoliberal constructions of individuality, and what it might therefore ignore about tree collectives and communal subjectivities, and their places in multispecies kinship networks. Even to talk about a generalised, individual tree as I do here may be a problematic atomisation of tree being: 'individual' trees may be more commonly interconnected through their root systems, so that the forests they compose, as I mentioned earlier, "are superorganisms with interconnections much like ant colonies" (Wohlleben 2016, 3, 14-8). In their superorganismic collectivity, entwined by multi-modal, chemically-mediated forms of communication, it might be most useful to think of *forest* rather than tree expression.

> hierarchical, it does not fall under the category of organismic life [which radiates around, and is anchored by, a center of reference]. (Marder 2012, 1370)

As a corollary, the tree does not unilaterally organize its milieu. Rather, it is comprised of a series of internal communicative networks along with pathways that communicate with its environment; the tree is, therefore, an open system inextricable from its environment. Plants actively articulate—join together—"organic and inorganic facets of their milieu, form ecosystems and microclimates… and transform the places of their growth into receptacles for other kinds of life. Their self-affirmation is, simultaneously, the affirmation of their others" (Marder 2017a, 121). The word for this system, Marder argues, is "world" or "life-world", because the subject is inseparable from its larger environment. Trees recognise not the categories of 'self' and 'other', then, but something closer to kin in a shared world, or clashes between various worlds (2012, 1370). To venture closer towards an ethological poetics of the tree, we might break open our most basic terms of reference: as a dispersed world of parallel intelligences, the tree is even more extraordinarily plural than we are. 'It' is most likely always-already 'they'.

Thus, the tree's being moves outwards, leaks outwards, as if solid liquid, always becoming. Unlike an animal, which carries its body from one place to the next, the tree *extends* their body, they reach. Where an animal might slide, shift or slip through space, then, the tree permeates space, weaves into and around it. Only within the narrow field of Western human perception does the tree appear to anchor space, to provide the vertical lines of a static grid with which we can organise our attention. But rather than anchoring, the tree is constantly presenting themself, taking part, being kin, and endlessly responding to the feedback from such presenting: the tree articulates like a slow, glacial flame. When a tree flowers, the blossoms punctuate, accentuate the tree's articulations, rather than form part in branches of yet further articulations. Flowers are bold, extravagant wormholes for tree transformation: there, tree becomes bee and wasp, takes flight. As for that other colour, the tree's particular shade of green, we should be careful about romanticising it. Chlorophyll cannot use the greens of the colour spectrum, so the tree reflects them back unused. What we are seeing when we see green leaves is “waste light,” what the tree rejects (Wohlleben 2016, 228). To properly appreciate the green of a tree’s leaves, then, we need an aesthetics of trash. But the brand of our aesthetics is of no immediate concern to the tree, whose relentless bi-/tri-furcations are part of a daily quest for light. Not too far removed from the performer who yearns to be under the spotlight, the tree’s is a lifelong dance for the sun. Often, they will bowl out space in order to make use of a sphere’s every angle. But within this green bowl, the tree’s body is ceaselessly shifting to collect every available drop of light. Light, of course, is everywhere; there’s no need to walk, to move through it. What matters is increasing your surface area, the space for potential contact. This is a deeply sensual poetics of touch, permeation, transformation.

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