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Poetic Plantwork Practices:
Radical Herbalist Relationships
with Plants

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Abstract

This project is about engagements between people and plants; namely those familiar plants that we call 'herbs' and those people - 'herbalists' - who cultivate intimate acquaintance with them. Looking to the praxes and pedagogies of Western herbal medicine in the British Isles and Ireland, it foregrounds those which emphasise working together with and learning from plants directly as knowledgeable and agential living beings with whom we are deeply ecologically entangled. These working relationships are explored as sites of poetic forms of practice, which practices are understood to constitute a quiet but potent challenge to EuroWestern paradigms of knowledge and world-relation. It contributes to recent plant scholarship which, drawing on the challenges brought by the post- and environmental humanities and discoveries from plant sciences, seeks to make space for plant realities within our thinking and explore their implications for our own. It also brings the practical expertise and knowledge of herbalists to the discussion, putting these two areas of exploration into dialogue. Its uptake of the poetic as a framework allows for the accommodation of herbalist-plant knowledge-in-relation and recognises the way that both fields (the poetic in its engagement of thought and language; herbalism in its interactions with plants) enact processes that (can) challenge and disrupt/destabilise the logical frameworks that underlie our cultural and socio-political paradigms. It chooses this framework as one that is appropriate to a EuroWestern cultural tradition and, in bringing these fields of practice to bear upon one another, seeks to explore this common disruptive potential and amplify it. In doing so, it hopes to learn something from herbalist practices of how to relate well to plant others in ways that accord with their - and, by extension, our own - ecological being.

Lay Summary

This project attempts to answer the question of how to relate well to plants. In doing so, it draws understanding and guidance from herbalists whose work involves getting to know plants as characterful, knowledgeable and powerful living beings, learning directly from and working together with them. These relationships are understood to be deeply challenging to the ways of thinking and of acting that are ingrained within contemporary EuroWestern culture. Ways of thinking and acting that we internalise and upkeep. So much so, that it's difficult, on these terms, even to recognise their knowledge as knowledge. To this end, I understand these relationships as forms of poetic practice. Which is to say, ways of interacting with the world that enliven it, engaging through the imagination and the senses as well as the intellect, where our creation and interpretation is foregrounded. Thus conceiving of herbalism as an art form (as well as everything else that it is). The poetic is enlisted as a space where the usual rules of reality don't hold. Where we can conjure and enter imaginative worlds, where functionality gives way to 'for itself' ness and words are felt and meanings become ambiguous. Understood in this way, herbalist-plant relations offer a model of ecological engagement with the world that breaks through the barriers of thought and habit to make space for that which is

typically excluded: plant being and plant knowing. Which excluded ecological, interactive being is also identified as the ground for our estranged 'individual' being. I aim to understand and learn from herbalist practices of developing relationship with plants, to amplify this disruptive potential.

Note on the Author

Leo spent many years studying philosophy to find the answers, but only found more questions. It was in the woodlands and the meadows that, learning the names and habits of the plants that grew all around her, she understood herself as participant in the vaster living world and developed a sense of things making sense. This thesis is finally the integration of two very disparate strands of her life. In addition to writing as a scholar she also writes as a lay herbalist. She conceived this project in part as an offering to the herbalist communities that continue to inspire her and this intention has also shaped the project throughout.

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Introduction

An Outline of the Project

This project is about relationships between people and plants. In particular, it is about the ways that people cultivate relationships with plants that illuminate them, in their vibrant particularity, as living beings. It is interested in the ways that people strive to transgress the boundaries of species difference to meet plants more on their own terms. That is, in recognition of and with respect for ecological interimplication, creating space for collaborative and informative exchange, working together with and learning from them. With this in mind, it looks to those convivial and familiar plants that we call 'herbs' and the people - 'herbalists' - who work closely with them, and whose working relationship involves the cultivation of these kinds of intimacies. These relationships, between herbalists and the plants they work with, trouble our rationalist cultural paradigms of knowledge and identity. This thesis seeks to accommodate and affirm them as sites of knowledge and as exemplary instances of a poetic kind of worldmaking, wherein the liveliness and particularity of plants is engaged and rearticulated by means of care-ful modes of attention and response. In doing so, it intends to illuminate and amplify their potential as a form of ecological challenge to the anthropocentric existent (whilst recognising its limitations). That such a challenge is needed is a premise. This project adds a voice to the many others that confront the logics and assumptions of the EuroWestern paradigm from an ecological standpoint.

From within the diversity of Western Herbal Medicine, I contextualise those more world-embedded, intuitive and direct approaches with which this thesis is

concerned within a lineage of 'folk' herbalism whose 'empiric' methods - historically othered and marginalised by the cultural hegemony of rationalist/positivist paradigms of knowledge - nonetheless persisted in quiet undercurrents of localised practice and as 'domestic' and 'alternative' medicine.¹ My desire in emphasising intuitive (which word is engaged broadly, to include all forms of non-intellectual perceiving and coming-to-know) relational plant practices is to illuminate and amplify their existence, and their radical disruptive potential. Herbalism as a practice, even in its most professionalised instantiations, tends to occupy a position of relative cultural marginalisation (indicated by its positioning under the umbrella of 'Complementary Alternative Medicine' or 'CAM'). Moreover, its representation within academia has been notably scarce. To the detriment of the latter; the recent movement in the environmental post-humanities towards an inclusion of plants in its concerns would find many interesting gestures towards a model of ethically inclusive ecological engagement within herbalist praxis. This thesis contributes something towards bringing these spheres into conversation, creating space for and amplifying herbalist experiential knowledge in relationship with plants. But farther reaching than this, it conceives that herbalist-plant relationships and the practices by which they are constructed hold potential as instructive of 'right relation' with the living world.² That is, they offer example of how thought and behaviour might be restructured along ecological lines - whilst retaining a firm footing in 'the human' - to begin restoring those connections excluded by rationalist and positivist paradigms, working with plants as allies, collaborators, teachers and friends to

¹ Mary Chamberlain writes of those traditional healers outlawed by the Church sanctions on medical practice whose "methods were primarily empirical and intensely practical" and references the use of the term 'empirics' to refer to marginalised women healers. Similarly, Mike Saks, in his account of the historical construction of orthodox and alternative medicine, recognises the 'empirics' "whose practice was not rooted either in formal training or in a systematic body of theoretical knowledge" to be still existent as a distinct grouping in C19th Britain. My use of this term emphasises these experiential, embedded aspects as opposed to the distanced formal and theoretical forms of church/state legitimated practice, and allows for the inclusion of intuitive (as well as 'trial and error') methods (Mary Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales: The History of Remedies, Charms and Spells* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), p. 48; Mike Saks, *Orthodox and Alternative Medicine : Politics, Professionalization and Health Care* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 67).

² The concept of 'right relation' is theorised within a context of WHM practice by Kathryn Niemeyer, who identifies 'ease', 'wholeness', 'harmony', 'congruence' and 'coherence' as typically emergent properties. Katherine Jean Niemeyer, 'Personalizing Western Herbal Medicine: Weaving a Tapestry of Right Relationships, a Grounded Theory Study' (doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, 2013), p. 108.

create bridges across species difference. In doing so, they create space in turn for the emergence of plant-thinking and plant-knowing into our own.

Research Questions and Aims

This project begins from the broad question of human relationship with plants. It asks 'what do ecologically appropriate relationships with plants look like?'. Or, slightly differently, 'how to cultivate meaningful relationships with plants as complex living beings?'. Or again, 'what does it mean to think with plants; learn with and from plants; work together with plants; create together with plants?'. In response, it looks to the practical expertise of herbalists, asking 'what can be learned from herbalist-plant relationships in this regard?' and 'what are the implications of these relationships?'. In looking to herbalist-plant relationships and their import, it also queries how to best understand and accommodate them and the kinds of knowledge that they engender, which question confronts EuroWestern thought and its epistemologies. In answer, it takes up a poetic framework of approach, seeking to explore its potentialities as a culturally appropriate framework for human-plant relations; one that might be able to accommodate culturally excluded knowledges and be conducive to ecologically appropriate relationship with the world. In doing so, this project also aims to contribute towards an academic and cultural accommodation of plant-being and plant-knowledge and to amplify the disruptive potential of poetic plantwork practices. Finally, this work seeks to illuminate marginalised herbalist experiential knowledge and practices, making space for herbalist voices within the dialogues of plant scholarship and amplifying herbalist plant-entangled knowledge and wisdom. Thus it conceives itself as a theoretical offering to the herbalist community.

Scope of the Project

This project is situated in and speaks to a EuroWestern cultural paradigm of thought and practice. The herbalist practices explored fall within the broad lineage of (traditional) 'Western Herbal Medicine'. Amongst its diverse instantiations, I am concerned in particular with intuitive, entangled strands of herbalist practice where the cultivation of relationship is foregrounded. Geographically, scope is limited to the British Isles and Ireland. Dialogues are constrained to a small number of (intentionally selected) herbalist interlocutors. Although there is a strong incidence within lay herbalism of these strands of practice, this selection is limited to those who identify professionally as herbalists and have public clinical and/or pedagogical practices. Finally, in attempting to theorise ecologically appropriate modes of plant relations, this project recognises the situated position of 'the human' as one that is shaped by culture and language. The aim is to work within and through these mediating structures, rather than seeking to abandon, ignore or transcend them.

Significance

This project contributes to the ongoing work within plant scholarship to remedy the significant historical omission of plants from academic consideration. In grounding this project in a study of marginalised herbalist practices of cultivating relationship with plants, I engage new perspectives and contribute towards the remediation of a significant under-representation of herbalism as a field within the humanities. The effort to put these disparate spheres of plant concern into conversation with one another thus constitutes a contribution to both fields. In uptaking an understanding of the poetic as a tool of world disclosure as a framework through which to interpret and understand herbalist-plant relationships, I offer a more expansive conceptualisation of the poetic that takes account of thought and language as a

function of the ecological, and in particular of the vegetal, rather than merely of the human. The characterisation of plant-oriented herbalist practices in these terms as a means to explore their radical potential is a unique contribution. The effort to excavate culturally latent capacities of world-animation from within poetic engagement as a culturally appropriate (and accessible) ecological challenge to anthropocentrism also constitutes a contribution.

Layout

The project is divided into two parts. The first part - 'Contexts and Concepts' - outlines the academic and non-academic contexts that inform and ground the work and lays the theoretical foundations for the inquiry. The second part - 'In the Field: Poetic Plantwork Practices' - explores the ways that herbalists cultivate working relationships with plants as living beings, drawing on interview material and herbalist-authored works, and putting these into conversation with ideas from within plant scholarship, the post-humanities and elsewhere. In the first part, Chapter One contains notes on the project's (herbalist and academic) contexts, including the literature review, as well as outlining its methodologies. Chapter Two lays the philosophical groundwork for the project, illuminating some of the crossings between plants and the poetic. The second part is thematically structured to consider distinct (though in reality inter-related and overlapping) aspects of herbalists' engagements with plants. Chapter Three - 'Creating Space; Remaking Worlds' - explores the way that space is recreated as supportive of plant encounters, including physical, non-physical and 'cultural' space. Chapter Four - 'Attention and Approach' - considers aspects of herbalists' coming to encounters with plants in ways that enable and elicit connection. Chapter Five - 'Response and Responsibility' - considers ways of responding to plants well, in honour of their contributions and of their being and in cultivation of ecologically participatory relationships. Chapter Six

- 'Articulation; Speaking with Plants' - looks at the ways that herbalist-plant encounters and relationships are articulated, exploring the parameters and possibilities of language as a tool of ecological relation. A concluding section summarises and reflects upon the project's discoveries.

PART ONE
CONTEXT AND CONCEPTS

Chapter One: Context and Method

1.1 Context and Field Reviews

Herbalism, its Plurality and Politics: A Brief Overview

So, first of all, some notes on the practical context in which this work is situated.

‘Herbalism’ is a broad and nebulous term, designating the use of plants as medicines. Although today culturally sidelined as an ‘alternative’ form of healthcare or healing (which categorisation can be understood as a political construction of that sidelining),¹ the use of plant medicines is both historically and geographically ubiquitous and constituted the orthodoxy prior to the establishment of a biomedical model as culturally standard.² ‘Western Herbal Medicine’ (or ‘WHM’) is the name given to contemporary practices of herbalism rooted within a ‘Western’ tradition of thought and praxis and is that used in professionalised herbal practice.³ A coinage

¹ Ronnie Moore and Stuart McClean, ‘Folk Healing and a Post-Scientific World’, in *Folk Healing and Health Care Practices in Britain and Ireland: Stethoscopes, Wands or Crystals*, ed. by R. Moore, & S. McClean (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010) pp. 22-54, (p. 24); Mike Saks, ‘Bringing Together the Orthodox and Alternative in Healthcare’, *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 11 (2003), 142–145 (142).

² Although the shift is by no means historically clear cut. MacLennan and Pendry (whose focus on legislative changes and emergence of ‘chemical based medicines’ in the reign of Henry VII offers an early dating of this shift amongst a diversity of scholarly opinion) note that nonetheless “a large proportion of the population relied on [herbal medicine] and to them it would have been the orthodox medicine of the time” (Euan MacLennan and Barbara A. Pendry, ‘The Evolution of Herbal Medicine as an Unorthodox Branch of British Medicine: The Role of English Legislation from Antiquity to 1914’, *Journal of Herbal Medicine*, 1:1 (2011), 2-14 (6)).

³ ‘Western’ itself is, of course, a problematic category of definition. It has been understood to reference a botanically European materia medica and a philosophically European tradition of thought (Nina Nissen, ‘Practitioners of Western Herbal Medicine and their practice in the UK: Beginning to Sketch the Profession’, *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 16 (2010), pp. 181-86 (p. 181)). Charis Boke also traces the histories of imperialism that the term ‘Western’ designates in its facilitation of the “work of gathering”; the “integrating, layering, and translating different modes of medical knowledge” that she finds to be characteristic of WHM thought and praxis - although there is some differentiation between the European and North American context within which she writes (Charis Ford Boke, ‘Ecologies of Friendship: Learning North American Practices of Care with Western Herbalists’, (doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 2018) p. 41). See too Claudia Manchanda’s problematisation of the erasures that this term within the context of ‘European’ herbalism performs (Claudia Manchanda, ‘Radical Roots: Decolonial Reflections’ in Dadachanji et al., *Wild Apothecary: Reclaiming Plant Medicine for All* (London: Aeon, 2021), pp. 636, 638).

of the last thirty years,⁴ arising in distinction to popular forms of herbalism of other cultural traditions,⁵ the term itself remains vague and undefined.⁶ Within both the UK and Ireland, the profession is governed by internal rather than statutory regulation, with typically rigorous standards of knowledge and experience of clinical practice required for membership of the diverse professional bodies. In Britain particularly, a concerted drive from the late seventies onwards towards the realignment of herbalist knowledge, praxis and identity with a scientific medical orthodoxy resulted in a rebranding of herbalism as ‘phytotherapy’⁷ and signalled a “deliberate break” with “the traditional approach [...] which has its roots in history and folk medicine”,⁸ resulting in some internal differentiation within the profession. Beyond its professionalised form, the reach and depth of herbal practice is difficult to determine, although an abundance of non-vocational educational offerings indicates significant interest. And whilst herbalism certainly occupies a marginal cultural position comparative to its usage historically, with a social norm of ubiquitous community-embedded or domestic herbal knowledge now generally considered a thing of the past,⁹ (although perhaps this remains more so the case as regards the occurrence of non-Western herbal traditions within diasporic communities),¹⁰ elements of this cultural lineage may still be seen in familiar

⁴ Nissen, ‘Practitioners’, p. 181.

⁵ Nissen, ‘Practitioners’, p. 181; Waddell, p. 1.

⁶ Waddell, p. 1; Nina Nissen and Sue Evans, ‘Exploring the Practice and Use of Western Herbal Medicine: Perspectives from the Social Science Literature’, *Journal of Herbal Medicine*, 2 (2012), 6-15 (7); Matthew Wood, ‘An Exploration of the Conceptual Foundations of Western Herbalism and Biomedicine With Reference to Research Design’ (MSc Thesis, Scottish School of Herbal Medicine, 2006).

⁷ Edmond VanMarie’s 2002 study assessed trends of ‘professionalisation’ within Britain and the main governing professional association for those who self-identify as ‘phytotherapists’ describes their membership to be “mainly from Britain”. (VanMarie, ‘Representing; Anonymous, *About Us*, College of Practitioners of Phytotherapy <<https://thecpp.uk/about>> [accessed 1 Jun 2021].)

⁸ Editorial to the first edition of *The British Journal of Phytotherapy*, 1990, cited in VanMarie, p. 94.

⁹ See Rosari Kingston’s studies of Irish indigenous medicine for a counterargument to this within an Irish context: Rosari Kingston, ‘The Thread that Could Not Be Broken’, *Skibbereen and District Historical Society Journal*, 5 (2009), pp. 65-91; *Ireland’s Hidden Medicine: An Exploration of Irish Indigenous Medicine from Legend and Myth to the Present Day* (Lewes, Aeon, 2021). Mary Beith also writes that in the Highlands of Scotland “the genuine practice of folk medicine [...] lingered on far longer than elsewhere in the British Isles” (Mary Beith, *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2021), p. 8.

¹⁰ One academic study on South Asian Diasporic herbal medicine seems to affirm this, finding that “(t)wo thirds of participants stated they used HMs [Herbal Medicines] to maintain their health and to treat various health conditions” (Sukvinder K. Bhamra, Adrian Slater, Caroline Howard, Mark Johnson and Michael Heinrich. ‘The Use of Traditional Herbal Medicines Amongst South Asian Diasporic Communities in the UK: Traditional Herbal Medicines Used by South Asian Communities’, *Phytotherapy Research*, 31:11 (2017), 1786–94).

practices, such as the traditional accompaniment of meat and fish with particular aromatic and digestive herbs.

Spanning both professionalised and lay instantiations of herbalist practice, a politically charged strand of 'radical' herbalism situates itself explicitly in a position of challenge to the social structures of state and capitalism and their underlying logics. A manifesto from the organisers of the UK Radical Herbalism Gathering delimiting the concerns, motivations and parameters of radical herbalism foregrounds an acknowledgement of the (diverse possible) socio-political and ecological contexts in which 'health' is shaped, emphasising commitments towards promoting autonomy of and access to the means of health, as well as deep political and ecological responsibility.¹¹ Whilst the scenes of the autonomous left have always given a home to DIY herbal practice,¹² recent years have seen a coalescence of these individual and collective practices into a broad and growing grassroots movement. At the same time, direct and intuitive approaches to plantwork - learning from the plants themselves - and the ecological import of these kind of relationships, as well as the drive to resituate herbalism within place-appropriate lineages of cultural heritage, are increasingly prevalent within a broader field of herbalist praxis. The growth of a politicised grassroots herbalism movement has coincided with a resurgence of interest in the heritage of folk practices in Britain and Ireland (with strong links to movements in the US), much of which also carries an integrated element of political awareness.¹³ These emphases on cultural and ecological situatedness reflect a concern amongst plantworkers to make efforts to re-root their practices within appropriate frameworks - cultural and socio-political, historical and contemporary. I use the metaphor of 'rooting' deliberately: the

¹¹ Anonymous, *What is Radical Herbalism?*, Radical Herbalism Gathering <<http://www.radicalherbalism.org.uk/whatisradherb>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

¹² See, for example, London Anarchafeminist Kolectiv, 'Chickweed: A Zine About Herbalism', (2009), available at <<https://www.sproutdistro.com/catalog/zines/diy/chickweed>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

¹³ See, for example, Scott Richardson-Read, Cailleach's Herbarium <<https://cailleachs-herbarium.com>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

etymological origin of the word 'radical' is well-noted within the ('grassroots') radical herbalist movement (and within the radical left more broadly) where it emphasises making change 'at the root'.¹⁴

In these efforts, these movements coincide with other calls within herbalism internationally for a resistance to the ongoing absorption of herbal medicine into a capitalist global economy. For example, Australian herbalists and scholars Jagtenberg and Evans argue that "traditional herbal medicine is dependent on the preservation of local cultures and local ecologies" naming the feedback of the global herbal industry into micro-level herbal practice as threatening to traditional models of herbal practice (particularly those of Indigenous cultures).¹⁵ Emerging narratives of decolonisation of herbalist practice within Britain and Ireland (following US example) recognise the damage of trends of appropriation of other cultural practices as well as the exploitation of resources to meet a globally-shaped market demand.¹⁶ An example is the emphasis on using native plants for smoke-cleansing in challenge to the widespread use of plants such as White Sage, sacred within diverse Indigenous traditions of North America and threatened by over-harvesting.¹⁷ Alongside this, an interest in and emphasis on the use of locally-available plants, particularly through practices of growing and foraging, feeds a culture of intimacy and relationship with plants as living medicines and a grounding in place. Within the context of the Britain and Ireland, I interpret this conscientious 're-rooting' as both a resistance to the logics of globalisation as they manifest within the sphere of herbalism (and have done since the age of botanical colonial 'discovery' of the 'New

¹⁴ "'Rad' in Latin means **root**. Radical herbalism is about getting to the root of health, addressing all dimensions – **the physical, emotional, social, political, spiritual, environmental**" (bold in original). Anonymous, *Radical Herbalism?*.

¹⁵ Tom Jagtenberg and Sue Evans, 'Global Herbal Medicine: A Critique', *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 9:2 (2003), 321–329, (322).

¹⁶ Nikki Darrell, *Decolonising Our Materia Medica*, online video recording, Vimeo <<https://theplantmedicineschool.com/community/articles-and-interviews/decolonising-plant-medicine>> [accessed 1 June 2021]; Manchanda, 'Decolonial', pp. 666-723

¹⁷ See, for example, Scott Richardson-Read, *Saining Not Smudging: Purification and Lustration in Scottish Folk Magic Practice*, Cailleach's Herbarium, (2019) <<https://cailleachs-herbarium.com/2019/02/saining-not-smudging-purification-and-lustration-in-scottish-folk-magic-practice>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

World') and the reductionist frameworks of thinking that they entail, and also a challenge to the long-effected detachment of plant practices from their cultural matrices on 'home soil' (that is, the long history of suppression of world-embedded, community oriented-forms of herbalism and their assimilation into regulated spheres of practice).

The integrally politicised, praxis-oriented, radical herbalist movement of the last decade - considerably lacking from academic purview¹⁸ - is itself contextualised within an ongoing wider resurgence in herbalism more broadly (whose reach spans the breadth of these diverse instantiations, from DIY practice all the way to the globalised, pharmaceutically-modelled herbal industry). An ongoing sentiment of 'revival', 'renaissance', and 'excitement' appears to be echoed throughout the herbalist profession and popular culture.¹⁹ Despite the loss of all but one of the former BSc course provisions in the UK,²⁰ alternative institutions and courses offering herbal education within a WHM (and beyond) framework are flourishing, with many herbalists coupling their clinical practice with a pedagogical one. Some of these comprise alternative routes towards professional training (enabling membership of a professional association and associated insurance). This trend towards diversity could perhaps be seen to counter the "emphasis on academic learning" which Peter Jackson-Main worries "may eclipse traditional values and practices", echoing "the process of exclusive professionalization that characterized the medical profession's assault on the lay community of practitioners in the

¹⁸ A notable exception in this regard is Bitcon, Evans and Avila's 2015 article identifying a grassroots movement through the blogosphere (Clara Bitcon, Sue Evans and Cathy Avila, 'The Re-Emergence of Grassroots Herbalism: An Analysis through the Blogosphere', *Health Sociology Review*, 25:1 (2016) <doi:10.1080/14461242.2015.1086956> 108-21, (118)).

¹⁹ Ayo Wahlberg (citing a 2007 assertion from the National Institute of Medical Herbalists that "enthusiasm for this ancient form of medicine has never been greater than it is today") writes that it is "a revival that is often traced back to the 1968 Medicines Act" (Ayo Wahlberg, 'Rescuing folk Remedies: Ethnoknowledge and the Reinvention of Indigenous Herbal Medicine in Britain', *Folk Healing and Health Care Practices in Britain and Ireland: Stethoscopes, Wands or Crystals?*, ed. by R. Moore, & S. McClean (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010) pp. 121-40, (187-8)). Wahlberg also traces this revival himself in his PhD dissertation (Ayo Wahlberg, 'Modernisation and its Side Effects: An Inquiry into the Revival and Renaissance of Herbal Medicine in Vietnam and Britain' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2006)).

²⁰ Anonymous, *Accredited Courses*, National Institute of Medical Herbalists, (2020) <<https://nimh.org.uk/about-nimh/types-of-memberships/accredited-courses>> [accessed 12 March 2021].

nineteenth century".²¹ It may also overlap with a renewed growth of 'traditional herbal medicine' forms, which "challenge the primacy of science as an appropriate foundation for herbal practice" emphasising "vitalism and holism and a very individualised approach to treatment".²² In these senses, the label 'traditional herbal medicine' is broadly descriptive of those herbalisms that this project considers, even where not explicitly adopted, and also speaks to an effort of the extrication of herbalism from its extrinsic political constructions and its recontextualisation within a self-determined sphere of definition.

These are nuanced areas of consideration. In the UK especially, the drive towards the 'professionalisation' of WHM in distantiation from its perception as traditional or 'folk' knowledge have long been an issue of divided opinion.²³ For some, it has constituted an unnecessary pandering to scientific orthodoxy and political power, hierarchising the practitioner-patient relationship and diminishing herbalism as a traditional practice. This remodelling along lines of scientific acceptability could even be perceived as succumbing to an external agenda of co-option in line with Singer and Fisher's analysis of herbalism's assimilation within 'integrative medicine' as a (perhaps historically resonant) "tactical strategy to preserve biomedical dominance through control of the knowledge base of 'other' medicines".²⁴ For others, it has been a necessary modernisation and definition of practice, facilitating professional standards. Yet, as previously mentioned, very many practitioners today occupy a position of (perhaps paradoxical but functional) holding of both strands simultaneously and Guy Waddell, discovering enchantment alive and well within the

²¹ Jackson-Main, p. 97.

²² Sue Evans, 'Changing the Knowledge Base', 2099. (It should be noted that the author writes in consideration of an international context from within an Australian one.) Elisabeth Brooke also notes the change. She recalls the professional reaction to her explorations in intuitive plantwork: "[m]y herbal colleagues were appalled and embarrassed and I was basically ostracised by the herbal community for dragging what they were trying to make scientific and acceptable into witchcraft and weirdness" before noting that "things have changed over the last twenty-six years and thankfully some parts of the community have embraced a more holistic and sensitive way to practice herbal medicine" (Elisabeth Brooke, *Traditional Western Herbal Medicine: As Above, So Below*, (London: Aeon, 2019), Ebook, pp. 29-9).

²³ VanMarie, p. 6.

²⁴ Judy Singer and Kath Fisher, 'The Impact of Co-option on Herbalism: A Bifurcation in Epistemology and Practice', *Health Sociology Review*, 16:1 (2014), 18-26, (18).

practices of WHM, recognises UK herbalism's (mainstream) political and scientific engagements as having constituted a necessary corollary of the "profession's fight for survival and recognition".²⁵ A contemporary 2002 study by Edmond VanMarie found a predominant continuation of culture, practice and political concern over and above any divisions ("[p]ractioners continue to practise in very much the same way as practitioners have traditionally done") concluding that the two seemingly divided strands of phytotherapy and medical herbalism were oriented towards different sets of relationship (the first between herbal institutions and the state/regulatory bodies/a scientific medical orthodoxy and the second between herbal institutions and society and herbalists and their patients).²⁶ And beyond this, the integral value of the contributions of scientific research to herbal knowledge and practice (as distinct from ideologies of 'scientism')²⁷ is thoroughly recognised and appreciated throughout the profession (competency with which is typically emphasised within professional training) regardless of political stance or practical approaches.

Again, amidst this plurality of approaches and emphases, this study concerns itself specifically with characteristically plant-entangled forms of practice that emphasise direct perception and intuitive knowledge, which I consider as a strand of WHM praxis (and which forms are absent from scientifically-aligned herbalism and phytotherapy). My perception of it as a 'strand' recognises an overlap and resemblance of ideas and practice, as well as connections between practitioners, but this demarcation, of course, encompasses a multiplicity of approaches, and no distinct boundaries of self-definition have been drawn within the broader field (within which intuitive elements of approach are also very common). Similarly, my choice to emphasise the radical epistemological potency of this aspect of herbalist

²⁵ Waddell, p. 5. See too Barbara Griggs, *Green Pharmacy: The History and Evolution of Western Herbal Medicine* (Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 1997), chapters 22, 23 and 25.

²⁶ VanMarie, p. 269.

²⁷ Darrell, *Decolonising*.

praxis, whilst philosophically grounded, recognises its integral political import and its place within 'radical' herbalist culture (which does have some defined boundaries of demarcation); however, the diverse instantiations of direct and intuitive herbalist practice do not always map onto this explicitly politicised praxis and I do not speak for the personal politics of the herbalists who figure in this work. All of which is to say that herbalists and their particular approaches are more heterogeneous than the parameters that I try to draw allow for! This appreciably philosophical interpretation of the radical potential of these practices must also recognise the limitations of this theoretical uptake of the idea of radicality; in real-world terms, it is perfectly possible and not uncommon for ecologically ethical intuitive plantwork practices to be thoroughly assimilated into a capitalist economic model, be lacking in an intersectional or even a social political analysis, and engage culturally appropriative practices. All of these things constitute a limit to the claims of radical potency that I make for herbalist practices²⁸ (which limitation by 'real-world' contexts applies equally to the potentialities of plant studies more broadly).²⁹

Herbalism at the Edges: A Very Brief Field Review

Relationship-Centred Herbalisms

Plant-entangled approaches that centre direct relationship as a way of developing plant knowledge accord with herbalism's roots as a mode of traditional knowledge and holistic practice with vitalist influence. Following the drive towards professionalisation and scientific legitimation in WHM in the latter decades of the twentieth century, they are now gaining traction once again as elements of an integrated herbalist praxis and pedagogy (alongside formalised knowledge).

²⁸ See also Boke, p. 25.

²⁹ Sarah Ives, "'More-than-Human' and 'Less-than-Human': Race, Botany, and the Challenge of Multispecies Ethnography', *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5:2 (2019), 1-5, (2).

Beyond the professionalised sphere, these kinds of relationship-centred herbalism are also common within (often individual) DIY healthcare practices. A number of training institutions encompassing relationship-centred methodologies as an integral part of their offerings presently exist.³⁰ In addition, a number of herbalist-authored works offer insight and instruction into intuitive modes of practice.³¹

Culturally Connective Herbalisms

The effort to relocate and rediscover herbalist knowledge and practice within the traditional cultural lineages of place constitutes another area of emphasis. In Scotland, a handful of notable publications present research into traditional herbal knowledge, practices and lore,³² and the lineage of Welsh herbalism finds a firm landmark in the historical manuscripts of the Physicians of Myddfai (which village - the “spiritual home of Welsh herbalism” - recently launched a scheme to ‘revive’ itself in promotion of this heritage).³³ The mythical aspects of this tradition are still upheld by many lay plant practitioners operating within a neo-pagan framework and several tradition-specific herbals exist.³⁴ Renowned works from Gabrielle Hatfield and others offer knowledge of traditional medicine and ethnobotanical perspectives within England, and within Britain and Ireland more broadly.³⁵ In Ireland, a strong continuity of the lineage of traditional herbal knowledge is well documented³⁶ and a

³⁰ Including the ‘School of Intuitive Herbalism’ (Nathaniel Hughes); the Plant Medicine School, a collaboration between Veriditas Hibernica (Nikki Darrell) and Grá Nádur; the School of Scottish Herbalism (Keith and Maureen Robertson), and the ‘Way of the Wise Healer’ apprenticeship (Carole Guyett).

³¹ See 1.2 Methodology: Methods: Engagement with Texts.

³² See, for example, Beith, *Healing Threads*; Tess Darwin, *The Scots Herbal: the Plant Lore of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1996).

³³ University of Wales Trinity St. David, *Lampeter Herbs and Folk, Summer Conference*, UWTSO <<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/herbs>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

³⁴ See, for example, David Hoffman, *Welsh Herbal Medicine* (Abercastle: Abercastle Publishers, 1996); Jocelyne Lawton, *Flowers and Fables: A Welsh Herbal* (Bridgend: Seren, 2006).

³⁵ See, for example, Gabrielle Hatfield, *Memory, Wisdom and Healing: The History of Domestic Plant Medicine* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Gabrielle Hatfield and David Allen, *Medicinal Plants in Folk Tradition: An Ethnobotany of Britain & Ireland* (Portland, Timber Press, 2004).

³⁶ Archive material from the ‘School’s Manuscript Collection’ held within the National Folklore Collection offers a wealth of information (available at <<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes>>). See, too, Rosari Kingston, *Hidden Medicine*, and Niall MacCoitir, *Ireland’s Wild Plants: Myths, Legends and Folklore* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2010).

number of projects and publications seek to reground in a Celtic herbal tradition.³⁷

Politically-Oriented Herbalisms

Another (sometimes overlapping) strand of herbalism is that which foregrounds political social analysis and politically oriented forms of practice. With roots in an undercurrent of DIY and community-based participatory practice, this connection has been in recent years nourished by the UK and Scottish Radical Herbalism networks and gatherings of the same name³⁸ (with Scottish and regional groups and events having seeded from the original gathering in the west of England), which events link qualified and lay practitioners and plantworkers in a national network, taking structural inspiration from the models of autonomous collective self-education characteristic of the radical left. Also notable is the 'Herbalists without Borders' network which formed in 2016 within the context of the refugee crisis as a way of connecting, supporting and developing the migrant solidarity and support work already being done by many herbalists in the refugee camps at Calais and Dunkirk, Lesvos, and elsewhere in Europe, as well as locally.³⁹

Within these networks are many small community practices and projects whose operations are grounded in a radical politics. Many of these explicitly foreground the radical potential of herbalism as a means of accessible autonomous healthcare for all, emphasising principles of empowerment within a context of social justice, and aiming to foster community resilience and connectedness through practices such as educational or collective growing spaces. These include the Dublin and

³⁷ See, for example: Keith Robertson and Danny O' Rawe, *Celtic Herbal Medicine* (Arran: Scottish School of Herbal Medicine, 2020); Lucy O' Hagan, 'Editorial', *Airmid's Journal*, 1 (2020), (n.p.).

³⁸ Anonymous, Radical Herbalism Gathering Archive, *Radical Herbalism Gathering* <<http://www.radicalherbalism.org.uk/radical-herbalism-gathering-archive>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

³⁹ Anonymous, *About: Herbalists Without Borders UK*, Herbalists Without Borders UK <<https://herbalistswithoutborders.co.uk/topic.php?pid=5>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

Cork 'Herb Bike' mobile street dispensaries;⁴⁰ the Solidarity Apothecary that distributes medicine to people experiencing state violence and repression";⁴¹ the Herbal Unity Clinic in Glasgow that offers free support to those within the asylum system;⁴² and Hackney Herbal in London which aims to foster connection and resilience of the local land and community through growing, support and skill sharing.⁴³ Other politicised strands of (mostly lay) herbalism work to inflect herbalist practice with the situated insights and experiences of marginalised (queer, trans, POC) identities, exposing and countering the inherited biases that herbalist practices frequently uphold in line with a broader social context of white supremacy and cis-/hetero-sexism, and reclaiming their function as a practice of resistance, autonomy and empowerment for these communities.⁴⁴

Academic Location and Lineages

Herbalism in the Academy

A 2002 PhD thesis on the 'professionalisation' of WHM in Britain by Edmond VanMarie noted that "any references to herbal medicine in more academic literature seems to be lost in general discussions of alternative medicine as a heterogeneous whole" with "analytic descriptions [...] almost absent, and any theoretical discussions entirely absent".⁴⁵ A decade and a half later, Guy Waddell's thesis on 'the enchantment of Western herbal medicine', found the situation unimproved, with

⁴⁰ Anonymous, 'Cork Herb Bike', Herbalista Free Clinic, (2021) <<https://herbalista.org/projects/cork-herb-bike>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁴¹ Anonymous, *About Nicole*, Solidarity Apothecary <<https://solidarityapothecary.org/about-nicole>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁴² Scottish Radical Herbal Network, 'Herbal Unity Clinic', Scottish Radical Herbal Network, (2017) <<http://radicalherbalscotland.co.uk/directory/unity-herbal-clinic>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁴³ Anonymous, Hackney Herbal <<http://www.hackneyherbal.com>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁴⁴ See, for example: Dadachanji with Manchanda, *Wild Apothecary*; Divina Botanica, *Healing Through Collective Change*, (Bristol: self-published, 2020), available from <<https://www.divinabotanica.com/herbal-medicine-for-the-black-commu>> [accessed 3 May 2021]; Zoe Miles and Sam Sivapragasam with Mylo North, 'Trans Plants: Imagining a Queer and Decolonial Botany', *Cultivating Justice Project* [zine].

⁴⁵ VanMarie, *Professionalisation*, p. 4.

herbalist's voices "curiously missing" (a gap that it sought to address).⁴⁶ Within the profession itself, a number of journals published by the diverse herbalist associations provide clinical praxis oriented research for (and by) practitioners.⁴⁷ Occasional herbalist-authored papers from more humanities-rooted theoretical perspectives may be found within these journals. A small body of literature also exists internationally within the Social Sciences; a 2012 field review found it to treat predominantly the (demographic) 'mapping' of WHM "practice, patients and practitioners" worldwide and the "theoretical issues" and "social factors" around it.⁴⁸ The history of herbalism has been the subject of some academic treatment, with papers authored by practicing herbalists amongst others,⁴⁹ and the Herbal History Research Network (comprising medical herbalists and scholars) was founded in 2009 to remedy the gap and "promote a scholarly approach which is systematic, objective and developmental".⁵⁰ Mary Chamberlain's history of 'old wives' tales' offers an admirable attempt to excavate a history of the oral tradition of folk healing broadly in Britain.⁵¹

The North American context offers a little more mapping in which to locate this project, with the doctoral research work of Kathryn Niemeyer and Charis Boke both theorising relational elements of Western herbalist practices through the frameworks of tailoring herbal formulas and of care for, and friendship with, plants respectively.⁵² Most directly informative for this work will be Guy Waddell's doctorate work theorising a current of 'enchantment' in WHM via ethnographic investigation into

⁴⁶ *Enchantment*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ For example, the peer-reviewed 'Journal of Herbal Medicine', published by NIMH, which centres research pertaining to the "clinical and professional application of botanical medicines". Barbara Pendry, 'Aims and Scope, *Journal of Herbal Medicine* <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-herbal-medicine>>

⁴⁸ Nissen and Evans, 'Perspectives', p. 6. See, too, subsequent work by Nissen and Evans respectively.

⁴⁹ Anne Stobart and Susan Francia (eds), *Critical Approaches to the History of Western Herbal Medicine: From Classical Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁵⁰ Anonymous, *About HHRN*, Herbal History Research Network, <<http://www.herbalhistory.org/home/about-hhrn>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁵¹ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*.

⁵² Niemeyer, 'Personalizing WHM', and Boke, 'Friendship'.

herbalist entryways. This work lays a foundation for my own in bringing posthumanist theory into conversation with herbalism and creating space for herbalist voices in academia, in exploring questions of affect and relationship within professional herbalist practices in a British context, and in relocating plants as agential beings to the heart of WHM.⁵³

Plants in the Academy

The oversight of herbalism notwithstanding, an accommodation of plants themselves as complex beings and not merely data subjects (for the sciences) or illustrative examples (for the humanities) has, within the last decade, and even moreso in the last few years, emerged as a distinct area of academic concern. In particular, the field of what has come to be known (after calls for its establishment in articles scattered across the humanities and social sciences)⁵⁴ as 'critical plant studies' (CPS) has developed and blossomed, with an ambition to welcome plant-being - characterised by (for example) agency, intentionality, desire, cognition and communication - into academic scholarship after a long history of exclusion.⁵⁵ As a field it is definitively cross-disciplinary, mingling insights from philosophy, literature, environmental pedagogy, botany, biology, anthropology, cultural geography and more. It works from within a self-conscious awareness of the anthropocentric structuration of our lifeworlds,⁵⁶ often in response to a context of structural ecological violence and its pressing consequences⁵⁷ and, more recently, in response to contexts of colonial, patriarchal and other socio-culturally and historically

⁵³ Waddell, *Enchantment*.

⁵⁴ For example, Lesley Head and Jennifer Atchison, 'Cultural Ecology: Emerging Human-Plant Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 33 (2009), 236–45; John Charles Ryan, 'Passive Flora? Reconsidering Nature's Agency through Human-Plant Studies', *Societies*, 2 (2012) <doi:10.3390/soc2030101> 101–21 .

⁵⁵ Monica Gagliano, Patrícia Vieira and John Ryan (eds), *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. xvi; Catriona Sandilands, 'Chapter 12: Plants' in Jeffrey Cohen and Stephanie Foote (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 157

⁵⁶ Sandilands, 'Plants', p. 157.

⁵⁷ For example: John Charles Ryan, 'Planting the Eco-Humanities? Climate Change, Poetic Narratives, and Botanical Lives', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 8:3 (2016), 61-70; Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits (eds), *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World* (Santa Barbara: Brainstorm Books, 2018)

informed forms of violence.⁵⁸ Many contributions offer explicit challenge to the (dualist, rationalist, separatist) logics of the EuroWestern cultural paradigm, emphasising instead cosmologies of entanglement and kinship.⁵⁹ Many also incorporate a moral element in the questioning; how we relate to and treat plants⁶⁰, the implications of an admission of plant-thinking into our own for how we live,⁶¹ and the difficult ethical questions of how to access and express the world of beings whose functioning - physiological, social, cognitive or linguistic - is so different from our own that our words often fail us.⁶²

This project begins with the question 'what do ecologically appropriate relationships with plants as living others look like?'. The ambition of deanthropocentrising our frameworks of thought and world relation in favour of ecologically appropriate ones also underpins what has been named a 'non-human' or 'posthuman' - and most recently a 'vegetal' - 'turn' within the academic humanities ('environmental humanities'/'post-humanities').⁶³ In particular, Val Plumwood's feminist deconstructions of the (anthropocentric, patriarchal) logics that underlie our separation from nature and efforts towards a framework of ethical ecological entanglement offer some of the philosophical foundations for this work.⁶⁴ Tracing the lineage of this turn towards the 'non/post-human', we find some prior grounding in process philosophy (which conception of the world as fundamentally

⁵⁸ For example: Sarah Ives, 'Race, Botany'; Laura Foster, 'Critical Perspectives on Plants, Race, and Colonialism: An Introduction', *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5:2 (2019); Caspar Heinemann, 'Fucking Pansies: Queer Poetics, Plant Reproduction, Plant Poetics, Queer Reproduction', *Ecocore*, (2017).

⁵⁹ For example: Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Giovanni Aloï, 'Speculative Phytopoetics: Towards Vegetal Kinship', *The Botanical Turn* (London, Ontario: McIntosh Gallery, 2022) [exhibition catalogue]; John Charles Ryan, *Posthuman Plants: Rethinking the Vegetal through Culture, Art and Poetry* (Illinois: Common Ground Publishing, 2015).

⁶⁰ For example, Hall, *Persons*; Michael Marder, 'Is it Ethical to Eat Plants?', *Parallax* 19:1 (2013), 29-37.

⁶¹ For example: Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Christopher Ketchum (ed), *Flowers and Honeybees: A Study of Morality in Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Craig Holdrege, *Thinking Like a Plant: A Living Science for Life* (Massachusetts: Lindisfarne, 2013).

⁶² Gagliano et al., *Language*; Marder, *Thinking*.

⁶³ Olga Cielemeńska and Marianna Szczygielska, 'Thinking the Feminist Vegetal Turn in the Shadow of Douglas-firs: An Interview with Catriona Sandilands', *Catalyst*, 5:2 (2019), 1–19 (2).

⁶⁴ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2001). See too the work of Deborah Bird Rose, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing.

dynamic mirrors something of ecological understandings, emphasising change, fluidity, organicity, relationship and interaction). And, too, phenomenology which dissolved the classical distanced observing and analysing subject of Western metaphysics in favour of situated relation and lived embodied experience.

Despite its traditional re-centring of the human (albeit in relation) and accordant neglect of the vegetal and (perhaps for this reason) its marginal appearance within CPS to date, the field of phenomenology informs, in particular, my uptake of a poetic framework of approach as a potentially supportive one for considering human-plant relations. Traces of plant-thought have been excavated from within Heidegger's writings by Michael Marder.⁶⁵ This project furthers the effort to reorient phenomenological thought towards the vegetal by engaging a phenomenological conceptualisation of the poetic as a tool of fundamental world disclosure in the service of plant relationship, as informed by more expansive understanding of language as something pertaining to more-than-human as well as human being in the world. I also find some precedent and inspiration in this from the writings of David Abram, whose engagement of the phenomenological poetic and its restoration of sensuality to thought in an attempt to re-ground thought in its ecological, worldly foundations finds resonance with many contemporary herbalist practices.⁶⁶

Significant space for plant studies has also been opened up by those areas of theory - women's and gender studies, queer studies, and critical race and decolonial studies - that have sought to centralise marginalised voices, perspectives and lives, filling in gaps within the narratives and unearthing the influence of self-obscuring

⁶⁵ Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Michael Marder, *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). See too Elaine Miller's 2002 *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (Albany: SUNY Press; 2002), which excavated from the informing German Idealist tradition a conception of subjectivity inspired by plant bodies and plant being in challenge to that of classical metaphysics.

⁶⁶ David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous, Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

logics of power within thought. The development of deconstructive tools and methodologies for undoing the logics of monolithic 'truth' and binaric thinking that exclude (subordinate/instrumentalise) certain groups as Other; an emphasis upon interconnectivity and intersectionality; a rejection of hegemonic transcendent standpoints to make room for multiple situated knowledges; the challenging of objectification to restore agency to excluded or silenced subjects, and an integral concern for ethics and the centralisation of praxis and lived experience within theorising, have all contributed to the ground upon which plant scholarship operates and are implicit within this project. Ecofeminist and ecospiritual thought provides early grounding for the project of the deanthropocentrising of thought taken up by the environmental humanities⁶⁷ and a disparate but potent distribution of feminist-informed thought within plant scholarship continues to enact persistent disruptions to any authoritative tendencies within the field.⁶⁸

Contribution and critique from Indigenous thought has laid bare some of the biases in academic practice, including tendencies towards the simultaneous exclusion/appropriation of Indigenous knowledge⁶⁹ and reiterated standardisation of (self-obscuring) white perspectives in academicised concepts and language.⁷⁰ Scholars have noted the similarity of certain concepts of the 'posthuman' turn with Indigenous cosmologies and called for a conscientious recognition of and making space for Indigenous standpoints.⁷¹ The imperialist conquest of plants and botanical knowledge can be recognised as a driving force at the heart of European

⁶⁷ For example, the work of Caroline Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, Deborah Bird Rose.

⁶⁸ See, for example: Irigaray's contribution in Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Prudence Gibson, Monica Gagliano, 'The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations with the Water Lily', *Ethics & the Environment*, 22:2 (2017), 125-46; Natasha Myers, 'Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000 year-old NaturalCultural Happening', *Catalyst* 3:2 (2017), 1-24.

⁶⁹ For example, Zoe Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29:1 (2016) <doi: 10.1111/johs.12124>.

⁷⁰ For example, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16:4 (2017), 761-80; Kyle P. Whyte, 'Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1:2 (2018), 224-42.

⁷¹ Kim Tallbear, 'Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints', *Fieldsights* (2011) <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/why-interspecies-thinking-needs-indigenous-standpoints>>

colonialism,⁷² and thus plant scholarship and WHM both have a particular responsibility towards a proactive self-reflexivity in this regard. This project attempts to respond to these imperatives by locating itself within clearly defined parameters of cultural specificity, speaking predominantly from, about and to a EuroWestern cultural tradition of thought (by reference to a EuroWestern tradition of herbalist praxis) with a view to helping catalyse the internal disruption of its hegemonic thought paradigms. It remains conscious, however, of the historical and ongoing entanglements that thoroughly permeate whatever parameters it draws, with key informing white theorists themselves drawing heavily on Indigenous thought, as well as a strong debt of Indigenous plant knowledge and praxis within contemporary WHM.⁷³

Situating Myself in the Field

Again, this project asks ‘what does it mean to think with plants; learn with and from plants; work together with plants; create together with plants?’ These concerns are at present being explored and unravelled throughout the blossoming field of plant studies in a myriad of diverse ways; approaches include gardening,⁷⁴ dance and movement,⁷⁵ ‘interview’,⁷⁶ literary and textual analysis,⁷⁷ creative and connective

⁷² Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 5-6; Lucille H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

⁷³ Via Physiomedicalism, for instance.

⁷⁴ Franklin Ginn, ‘Death, Absence and Afterlife in the Garden’, *Cultural Geographies*, 21:2 (2013), pp. 229–245; Stacey Langwick, ‘A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 33:3 (2018), pp. 415–43.

⁷⁵ Meredith Evans, ‘Becoming Sensor in the Planthropocene: An Interview with Natasha Myers, July 9th 2020’, <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/becoming-sensor-an-interview-with-natasha-myers>>; Rivi re, Loup, ‘Dancing is an Ecosystem Service, and So Is Being Trans’, in Ida Benke and Jorgen Bruhn (eds), *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices* (Earth, Milky Way: Punctum, 2022) pp. 303-11.

⁷⁶ John Hartigan’s instructional chapter on ‘How to Interview a Plant’ resonates with many of the intuitive techniques used by herbalists (though I’ve never heard this term used!); John Hartigan Jr. *Care of the Species: Races of Corn and the Science of Plant Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). See too Holdrege, *Thinking*.

⁷⁷ Randy Laist (ed.), *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013); Patr cia Vieira, ‘Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing’ in Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira, *Language*, ed. by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patr cia Vieira (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 215-33.

languages,⁷⁸ co-performance,⁷⁹ computerised plant-human interfaces,⁸⁰ as well as more conventionally analytical studies.⁸¹ They are questions that equally inform the work of herbalists that engage direct and intuitive methods. This project's exploration of herbalist instances of thinking, learning, working and creating together with plants builds upon this existing (dynamic) body of understanding, offering additional insight from this field.

In looking to herbalist-plant relationships, I position myself alongside a number of other works that derive insight on plant being and (right) relationship with plants by learning from experts.⁸² To date, this is the first study that engages herbalists within the UK and Ireland to this end. A scattering of works that have successfully engaged plant and more-than-human others as participants, co-authors and collaborators in the production of knowledge offer further potential and direction for this project.⁸³ Again, considerable influence is drawn from the work of UK herbalist, Guy Waddell, whose study of enchantment within herbalist entryways to the profession can be considered a landmark in welcoming herbalist voices and knowledges into the academic humanities.⁸⁴

A further research question concerns the implications of the herbalist-plant

⁷⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London: Penguin, 2020).

⁷⁹ nikolić, mirko and Neda Radulovic, 'Aesthetics of Inhuman Touch: Notes for "Vegetalised" Performance', *Ruuku*, 9 (2018), ed. by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Milla Tiainen, Tero Nauha & Marie-Luise Angereno <<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/372629/372630>>.

⁸⁰ Christa Sommerer, Laurent Mignonneau, and Florian Weil, 'The Art of Human to Plant Interaction', *The Green Thread*, ed. by Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira (Lanham: Lexington, 2019), pp. 233-254.

⁸¹ Marder, *Plant Thinking*; Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

⁸² For example, Hannah Pitt, 'On Showing and Being Shown Plants: A Guide to Methods for More-than-Human Geography', *Area*, 47:1 (2015), 48-55 (54); Foster, 'Critical Perspectives'; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Hall, *Persons*; Ginn, 'Death'; Hartigan, *Care*.

⁸³ For example, Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, 'Working With and Learning from Country: De-Centring Human Authority', *Cultural Geographies* 22:2, (2015), 269-283; Michelle Bastian, Owain Jones, Niamh Moore and Emma Roe (eds), *Participatory Research in More-Than-Human Worlds* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017); Hannah Pitt, 'An Apprenticeship in Plant Thinking' in *Participatory Research in More-Than-Human Worlds* ed. by Michelle Bastian, Owain Jones, Niamh Moore and Emma Roe (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 92-106.

⁸⁴ Waddell, *Enchantment*.

relationships that I consider, and in particular, I seek to understand their deep philosophical and political implications as radically potent for an ecologically rooted ethics. This aim is contextualised within the efforts of a considerable body of work within CPS and the environmental humanities that seeks to think through the ecological/ethical/sociopolitical ramifications of engaging with plants to re-evaluate our thinking and our culture from a plant-informed perspective. It also resonates with and draws upon Eduardo Kohn's adjacent project of an 'anthropology beyond the human'.⁸⁵ In looking to herbalist engagements of plants, I diverge from much of the work being done in CPS and related disciplines that takes as a springboard for re-evaluation the advances being made in scientific understandings of plant being and behaviours.⁸⁶ The informing fertile ground for this project is rather those 'old' kinds of knowings of plants that characterise the folk/vitalist tradition of herbalism. In rooting in the folk/vitalist traditions of European plantwork - a form of traditional knowledge - that continue to inform certain strands of contemporary herbalism, I seek to expand the discourses of plant studies to accommodate this element of European indigenous knowledge, whilst recognising that this tributary of herbalism is fragmented and compromised (both by violence suffered and violence perpetrated) as any kind of 'knowledge system'. This is a contribution to the field.

My final research question asks 'how to best understand and accommodate herbalist-plant relations and the kinds of knowledge that they engender?' This question speaks to the project within plant studies and the environmental humanities of - recognising the limitations and agendas of EuroWestern paradigms - deanthropocentrising our thought in line with an ecological reality.⁸⁷ My choice to adopt an affirmative stance towards the belief/knowledge schema of herbalism, in

⁸⁵ Kohn, *Forests*.

⁸⁶ See, for example: Chamovitz, Daniel, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Washington: Island Press, 2016); Gagliano et al., *Language*.

⁸⁷ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*; Marder, *Plant Thinking*.

which plants are regarded both as medicines and as 'allies', follows a path already laid by others including Eduardo Kohn and Matthew Hall,⁸⁸ uptaking Kohn's (ecologically resonant) methodology of amplification. It is also a contribution to the critical problematic within plant (and other 'more-than-human' oriented) scholarship of how and to what extent we might work through those anthropocentric structures of meaning that we necessarily inhabit⁸⁹ to develop relationships with plants, offering an exploration of an affirmative stance as a strategy of exploration. In this, it positions itself at the opposite end of the spectrum to the boundarying of what can be known in preservation of plant alterity argued for by Marder, opting instead for exploratory blurriness.⁹⁰ This strategy is resonant with the connective praxis of those herbalisms that it studies, and also with Plumwood's ethical-ecological stance of intentional recognition (which will be taken up in Chapter Five).

The poetic framework of approach that I seek to enact finds a foundation, as mentioned, in a phenomenological uptake of the poetic as a tool of disclosure, which understanding draws on the concept of *poiesis* as a form of collaborative making. It resonates with, but differs from, those contemporary strands of 'poetic inquiry' (and strands of 'ecopoetics') that utilise literary poetic production as a methodology,⁹¹ emphasising instead a philosophical understanding of the poetic in its potentialities as a mode of world-relation. A productive resonance is found in the unexpected corner of Starhawk's classic exposition of witchcraft as 'a religion of poetry', which theorises from an embedded standpoint of praxis-driven feminist ecospirituality;⁹² which I also consider via secondary scholarly feminist critiques. I situate myself in a position of complementary but distanced adjacency to the

⁸⁸ Kohn, *Forests*; Hall, *Persons*.

⁸⁹ Gagliano et al., *Language*, xx; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 242.

⁹⁰ *Plant Thinking*, p. 13.

⁹¹ See, for example: Monica Prendergast et al. (eds), *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Rotterdam: Brill, 2009).

⁹² Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 209.

project of 'phytopoetics'/'phytographia' as expounded foremost by John Charles Ryan, which seeks to work self-consciously with dynamics of plant affect and plant self-expression in artistic poetic production, engaging them in dialogue or as as collaborators.⁹³ It also finds resonance with Matthew Hall's work on myth as a space wherein we can discover otherwise culturally excluded truths of plant being and of human-plant relations.⁹⁴

1.2 Methodology

Introduction: Accommodating Herbalist-Plant Knowing

This research looks at the ways that herbalists cultivate meaningful relationships with the plants they work with to understand the implications and possibilities of these relationships for ecological right relation. This question concerns practices; ways of doing things; modes of approach. To this end, I engage an ethnographic methodology, interviewing several herbalists about their work. I also draw on relevant herbalist-authored texts in which herbalists describe their practices and ideologies. Implicated in this question of practices (a 'how' question) is another question of epistemologies (a 'what' question), concerning the knowledges that herbalists develop in their engagements with plants. As a product of relationship, herbalist-plant knowledges may involve procedural or practical forms of knowledge that make sense within the context of the interaction, sometimes involving intuitive elements; perhaps, too, emotional or energetic ones. The second question then is

⁹³ John Ryan, 'Poetry as Plant Script: Interspecies Dialogue and Poetic Collaboration in the Northern Tablelands Region of New South Wales', *Transformations* 30 (2017), pp. 127-149; 'Writing the Lives of Plants: Phytography and the Botanical Imagination', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35:1 (2020), pp. 97-122; 'Decentering the Human, Imagining the More-than-human (Poetry, Plants, and the New England Region of Australia)', *Litera*, 19:2 (2020), pp. 173-193. See too the work of Joela Jacobs, which mobilises the concept of phytopoetics to trace plant agency in literature (Joela Jacobs, 'Phytopoetics: Upending the Passive Paradigm with Vegetal Violence and Eroticism', *Catalyst* 5:2 (2019), 1-18) and Patrícia Vieira, who mobilises the concept of phytographia to similar end (Vieira, 'Phytographia').

⁹⁴ Matthew Hall, *The Imagination of Plants: A Book of Botanical Mythology* (New York: SUNY, 2019).

entangled with the first: the 'what' bleeds into the 'how', the 'knowing' into the 'doing'. Some herbalists have expressed these kinds of procedural, practical or intuitive herbalist knowings - that intimacy of acquaintance with a plant and its medicinal virtues that informs prescriptive decision-making - within a framework of 'tacit knowledge'.⁹⁵ These are kinds of knowledge that are highly embodied and resist verbalisation. The resistance of such knowledge-forms to being communicated shows up some limitations with any predominantly intellectual approach and this is noted as a potential constrictive factor for this project; one that reflects the difficulties of engagement with plants more broadly. I do, however, bring some experience as a former student of herbalism and as a lay herbalist and member of the radical herbal community to the table, which equips me with a certain foundation of understanding from which to launch my ethnographic explorations. In line with feminist epistemologies and the methodological demands of situated knowledge, I acknowledge and regard these entanglements as an advantageous position from which to question my own conceptual framework as researcher with a view to accommodating and amplifying herbalist-plant relationships and the knowledges they give rise to in challenge to those broader cultural paradigms that would exclude them.

Implications and Accountability

This work has been constructed as an academic thesis, but is also grounded in and intends to feed back into the spheres of radical herbalism and relational plantwork. Underlying and framing the project at all times then is an attention to how well it makes sense within those contexts that give it meaning and that it has chosen to amplify, which attention infuses the project with an intended accountability to praxis

⁹⁵ Veda West and Alison Denham, 'The Clinical Reasoning of Western Herbal Practitioners: A Qualitative Feasibility Study', *Journal of Herbal Medicine*, 8 (2017), 52–61 (59); Danny O 'Rawe, *Plant Healer Federation and Tacit Knowledge*, Sensory Solutions, <<https://www.sensorysolutions.co.uk/2019/07/13/plant-healer-federation-and-tacit-knowledge>> [accessed 3 May 2021] (n.p.).

- as it is this that most characterises herbalism as a field. This work accords with feminist and ecological imperatives of researcher situatedness (researchers as much as any other life forms being comprised by and implicated within their worlds) and its methodologies seek to reflect the research ambitions of learning how to better enact ecological right relation. This project is 'inquiry-driven', which is to say that it gains its definition and structure predominantly from its own internal dynamic locus rather than disciplinary boundaries;⁹⁶ namely, the research objectives as they make sense within their informing and intended contexts and the process of research.⁹⁷ This reflects something of ecological forms of self-organisation along lines of internal ('for-itself') mean-ing. That beings exist as entangled loci of exchange and interaction, representation and perception (the re-cognition of which interactions in humans contributes to the formation of selves) - is also reflected methodologically on the level of the research by the principles of transdisciplinarity and synthesis. Transdisciplinarity is a mode of approach that works "across, through and beyond" disciplines and thus is inherently dynamic and adaptable.⁹⁸ It is a mode of inquiry that accommodates and reflects the complexity of the world, moving through perspectival frameworks and finding resonance between them, and looking at the relationships between things.⁹⁹ The synthetic mode of knowledge acquisition, which seeks out resemblances and connections across diverse disciplines, also resonates with the motion by which living processes self-organise by virtue of the amplification of patterns (more on this in chapter five). Within this project broadly, the methodological approaches of transdisciplinarity and synthesis are reflected in the diversity of informing voices and perspectives that feed into it, representing thinking from across the humanities and outwith academia entirely. Within the bounds of

⁹⁶ Alfonso Montuori, 'Gregory Bateson and the Promise of Transdisciplinarity', 12:1-2, (2005), 147-58 (p. 154).

⁹⁷ Although, as previously noted, this project locates itself in relation to the concerns and objectives of Critical Plant Studies and the Environmental Humanities; each of which field themselves traverse and transgress conventional disciplinary boundaries in their operation.

⁹⁸ Alfonso Montuori, 'Transdisciplinarity and Creative Inquiry in Transformative Education: Researching the Research Degree' in *Research on Scientific Research*, ed. by Mauro Maldonato and Ricardo Pietrobon (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), pp. 110-35 (p. 130).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

critical plant scholarship and the environmental humanities in particular, it also uptakes insight from within theoretically divergent lineages, amplifying the resonances between them and seeking synthesis between perspectives and approaches in service to an understanding of human-plant relationships in practice.

Methods

Listening to Herbalists

Working within the context of an emergent academic interest in plants, this project seeks to create space for, listen to, and amplify herbalist voices. It does this primarily through an ethnographic strategy, interviewing five experienced herbalists about their practices, alongside engagement with herbalist-authored words, putting these insights into dialogue with theory and plant scholarship. Participants were selected specifically for their incorporation of particular practices or ideas within their work that accorded with the interests of this thesis. Namely, ways of working with plants that challenge culturally ingrained ways of thinking, knowing and doing. Thus, the elements of these herbalists' work that made them appropriate as informants for this thesis can be regarded as among the more unconventional and marginal elements of broader professional herbalist praxis. They do not, therefore, constitute a representative sample of WHM ideologies or practices, but rather that area of herbalist culture wherein the cultivation of meaningful relationships with plants as complex living beings is foregrounded. Neither do the elements of their work discussed constitute a comprehensive representation of the full range of their individual practices or methods, but are determined by the research interests of this project. This relational bias is acknowledged as a platform for the amplification of these more marginal or underacknowledged elements of herbalist praxis (the cultivation of direct relationship with plants as living beings), which selective focus contributes towards the remediation of a marked lack of their representation in

academic literature. My position, as a lay/student herbalist, and loosely participant within radical herbalist subculture, also resonates with forms of 'auto-anthropological' research wherein research is conducted within one's own community.¹⁰⁰

The ethnographic component of this project was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines on ethical consent. Participants had been given a brief description of the project and its aims prior to agreement to interview with the opportunity for further questions if desired, as a means of further aiding informed consent and facilitating topically focused dialogue. Interviews followed a loose conversational format centred around 'themes' (reflective of the thematic organisation of the second part of this work) in an attempt to allow as much space as possible for their own thought processes and stories to come to the fore within the conversation. The interview format was partially conceived to reflect some of what I knew of herbalist strategies of interaction with patients, offering curious attention and gentle directional prompts. An existing familiarity with the methods, practices and culture of actively plant-informed herbalisms from my experiences as a student and lay practitioner, as well as acquaintance with individual herbalists' work via published material or first-hand experience of their pedagogical practice, provided the groundwork of familiarity for being able to ask more pertinent guiding questions and elicit relevant experiences, accounts, ideas and stories.¹⁰¹ The decision was taken to name participants, as public figures, in their professional capacity as herbalists (with the option of anonymisation at request). This was also an effort to credit their contributions in this regard (which was conceived as an opportunity for recompense for their time and trust) on a level equal to those

¹⁰⁰ Marilyn Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology' in *Anthropology at Home* ed. by Anthony Jackson (London: Tavistock, 1987) pp. 16-37.

¹⁰¹ Three of the herbalists interviewed (Carole Guyett, Nikki Darrell and Nathaniel Hughes) are authors of written works also taken up within this project; two of them (Carole Guyett and Nathaniel Hughes) I had also worked with as a student, and the remaining two (Cristina Cromer and Clare Holohan) I had encountered in person as speakers/workshop hosts at herbalist events.

gleaned via textual interaction, facilitating a greater coherence between the different forms of herbalist-derived information as they occurred within the text.

Difficulties with the interview format arose with the question of navigating my own pre-existent entanglements within the bounds of the interview and attempting to temper their potential influence on participant responses (where, for example, sticking to a predetermined script of questions would have allowed for greater mitigation against this). Weighed against this difficulty were the recognitions that a more conversational mode facilitated the possibility of depth and an openness with regard to the theoretical underpinnings and project objectives with which I was coming to the interview (in addition to helping to keep the conversation from following too many peripheral tangents - a risk of my strategy of allowing as much space as possible for response) and contributed some transparency, facilitating a relationship in which I myself held a greater degree of vulnerability (my ideas being thus open to critique and disagreement!) and offering space for participants' self-reflexive theoretical understandings of their own work (thus attempting to engage with them as collaborators rather than 'subjects' or 'informants'). Additionally, there was the recognition that these mutual adjustments were a - to some degree inevitable - facet of the dialogue as a manifestation of relationship. To borrow the words of one participant:

Each individual requires a different style of bridging. So the way I'm talking to you now is bridging to you. If somebody else did this interview I'd be talking in a totally different way. You see what I mean? So, in a way, the nature of our social interactions is that we're constantly bridging between one another. [...] And that's important. It's a relational thing that, bridging.¹⁰²

That some of my interlocuters were known to me in advance (and sometimes I to them) carried with it additional associated risks of researcher bias within the

¹⁰² From my interview with Nathaniel Hughes.

processing of information, for example with regard to my capacity to interpret statements in a way not clouded by my prior knowledge and presumptions or to offer critique. Again, these considerations were weighed against the acknowledgement that this kind of care-ful self-reflexive negotiation of prior knowledge or involvement echoes the herbalists' own navigations with plants that were precisely the topic of consideration and also offered a truer representation of my own situated entanglements as researcher.¹⁰³

Engaging with Texts

Direct ethnographic work was further supported through reference to herbalist-authored texts (most of which had been published within the period of research of this thesis).¹⁰⁴ These works, drawing on the tradition of 'herbals', and, explicitly, on the authors' own wealth of knowledge and experience, often also included instructional or inspirational components by which the inexperienced reader could feel informed and encouraged to get to know and work with plants themselves in practical ways; to go and get stuck in. This heuristic element of these texts (substantiating the premise that the skills of cultivating ecological relationships with plants are teachable and learnable) offered clear articulation from herbalists of their own methods and practices, in their own words (valuable in light of the 'bridging' aspect of the interviews), thus speaking directly to the question of how to go about (and how herbalists go about) getting to know plants well.

¹⁰³ Kim TallBear's conceptualisation of 'standing with' is also instructive as regards these considerations. Kim Tallbear, 'Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry', *Journal of Research Practice*, 10:2 (2014).

¹⁰⁴ Herbalist-authored works referenced in this regard are as follows: Elisabeth Brooke, *Traditional Western Herbal Medicine: As Above, So Below*, (London: Aeon, 2019); Amaia Dadachanji with Claudia Manchanda, *Wild Apothecary: Reclaiming Plant Medicine for All* (London: Aeon, 2021); Nikki Darrell, *Conversations With Plants: The Path Back to Nature* (London: Aeon, 2020); Carole Guyett, *Sacred Plant Initiations: Communicating with Plants for Healing and Higher Consciousness* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Company, 2015); Christopher Hedley and Non Shaw, *The Herbal Book of Making and Taking* (London: Aeon, 2020); Nathaniel Hughes and Fiona Owen, *Intuitive Herbalism* (Nailsworth: Quintessence Press, 2014); Nathaniel Hughes and Fiona Owen, *Weeds in the Heart: A Five Valleys Herbal* (Nailsworth: Quintessence Press, 2016); Keith Robertson and Danny O'Rawe, *Celtic Herbal Medicine* (Arran: Scottish School of Herbal Medicine, 2020); Seed Sist@s, The, *The Sensory Herbal Handbook: Connect With the Medicinal Power of Your Local Plants* (London: Watkins, 2019).

Strategies

Centralising Relationship

In their introduction to the 2018 anthology *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World*, Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits hope that the interdisciplinary approach utilised therein might begin to mitigate the effects of the “conceptual regimes” of Western metaphysics having “stifled a vocabulary and theoretical apparatus that might emerge from the vegetal world” (in which obscurity even the humanities has been complicit).¹⁰⁵ “Each of the contributors to this volume” they write “addresses vegetal life to better comprehend their own artistic and academic genres. Although we can’t ‘speak plant,’ we can seize the opportunity to interrogate the absence of an appropriate lexicon to discuss the vegetal world”.¹⁰⁶ This interrogation of absence and impossibility before turning back, with the insight of vegetal contemplations, to one’s respective domain, is not the aim of this project. Herbalists consistently work through and across these difficulties to enact relationships of exchange. These relationships are the point. In the words of one practitioner and interviewee of this project, “relationship is everything”.¹⁰⁷ Herbalists frequently do seek to ‘speak’ with plants, and to hear what plants have to ‘say’ (even if not necessarily conceiving of such communications in ‘speech’ terms); which is very different from the discussing - speaking *about* - plants that Brits and Gibson aim for. This thesis centralises herbalist relationships with plants because, within the geographical parameters of the project, I consider herbalists who centre living plants in their work to be those who know them best; they are experts of plant engagement. Herbalists seek to better understand plants themselves, in their own right. Their domain - healing with plants; or, as many conceive it, facilitating plants in their facilitating of patients’ self-

¹⁰⁵ Gibson and Brits, ‘Introduction: Covert Plants’ in *Covert Plants*, ed. by Gibson and Brits, p.12.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Carole Guyett, interview.

healing - centres plant being and plant knowledge (albeit with an emphasis on their medicinal virtues, although, as we shall see later, this is perhaps not such a narrowed focus). They do not turn back from plant being to their own domains, because their domain precisely concerns the opening up of space for plant being.

A Poetic Framework

The methodologies of the project are oriented towards accommodating, amplifying and learning from herbalist insights and practices (which focus is contextualised within the greater question of how we might come to know and cultivate appropriate ecological relationships with plants). In looking to the work of herbalists, it hopes to not get stuck with the problems of inassimilable alterity and limits of conceptualisation that can constrict philosophical or theoretical investigation. Herbalist plantwork praxis is precisely about finding ways to bridge these gaps and dissolve these boundaries (without losing oneself - as can be, of course, a risk in unstructured engagements with those plants designated 'psychoactive' in particular). A strategic accommodation, uptake and amplification of herbalist practices is supported by a poetic framework of understanding, as informed by phenomenology. The choice of this framework also then has methodological dimensions; it is a way of making space for and considering herbalist-plant relationships and the kinds of knowledge that they encompass, as far as possible, on their own terms. In characterising them as 'poetic', I am conceiving herbalist practices through a framework that favours attentive listening, feeling and finding connection with, interpreting and amplifying over interrogation or testing. But it does not sit in opposition to or exclude other modes of theoretical understanding (for example, I also draw insight from biosemiotic and scientific conceptual understandings of ecological relationship and plant lives respectively) and also aims to emphasise continuity across human and plant embodied experience. A poetic framework is engaged then, less as a theory, than as an ecologically appropriate

stance - an approach, a way of being-towards - that intentionally *enacts* a certain conceptual schema (one that recognises plants as agential, meaning-ful, knowledgeable beings with whom we are integrally ecologically interimplicated). That is, a poetic approach is a way of taking up these understandings and putting them into practice, within the context of real, worldly relationships with plants, in a way that reifies them.

Chapter Two: Learning from Plants

Introduction

This project takes an affirmative stance towards herbalist practices of engaging with plants as sites of knowledge and exemplary forms of ecological world relation, aiming to illuminate, emphasise and amplify them as such. This framework does not exclude the possibility of others; as emphatically practical and situated within relationship, it can complement other theoretical or descriptive frameworks by exceeding them or by enacting them. Herbalism, typically, is a field of chiasmatic complexity. Occupying a connective space in between plants and people, both determinedly holistic and scientifically informed, it often draws upon and holds together multiple different practices and perspectives. Perhaps this reflects the complexity of the plants themselves, which in their capacity as 'medicines' (one of myriad guises) span a broad reach of less or more subtle functions: those that can be described pharmacologically and reliably standardised as off-the-shelf remedies; those that are more particular to the specific interaction; those effects that exceed the physical interaction; those that express themselves on the level not of persons but of ecologies.

The objective then is in no way to devalue or to dismiss analytic approaches to knowledge, but to disrupt their hegemony as culturally standard as far as they seek to monopolise true knowledge, as, in fact, they give us only part of the picture. This is something well recognised by herbalism as a field whose roots lie within traditional knowledge, whose historical theoretical underpinnings traverse holistic and vitalist understandings of the world, and whose practices engage plants as complex wholes whose medicine is synergistic. This approach offers an understanding of herbalism as an art form and an ecological ethics as well as it being a science. This next chapter begins by outlining the rationale for and potentialities of turning to plants within a cultural context of ecological

estrangement, offering a preliminary consideration of what this might mean in practice. It then offers an exposition of the poetic as applicable to plantwork, drawing on phenomenological understanding and other theory to explicate what I mean by a poetic approach. Finally, it will consider the historical entanglements of plants and the poetic, to further elaborate the affinities between the two, offering thoughts on the opportunities that a poetic approach extends to contemporary plantwork practice.

2.1 Resisting Abstraction: Herbalism as Emplaced Knowledge

The EuroWestern cultural paradigm is premised upon the highly abstracted thought forms of rationalism and a separation from (and domination of) nature.¹ Literature within phenomenology and elsewhere has detailed the implications of this world estrangement with the operations of language, showing how the linguistic forms of thought that we work within are themselves also an output that structures how we perceive the world around us, framing the terms of all of our encounters.² But even more than this, these structural anthropocentric projections, reflected through the amplifying forces of culture, technology, colonialism and capitalism, have now written themselves physically back onto the world, including 'nature', to such an extent that the physical world itself, independently of human presence or perception, is irremediably shaped by (certain) human practices (this is what the term 'Anthropocene' seeks - problematically - to name).³ In this way, the elements of the world that we encounter, speak and think, whether ostensibly the products of human creation or a part of 'nature', are, always already, overflowing with a flood of abstractions that carry cultural, social and political outlooks and agendas, but which

¹ Plumwood, *Feminism; Environmental Culture*.

² See, for example: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); Abram, *Sensuous*.

³ For example, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's frequently cited formulation of "human beings as a force of nature in the geological sense" (Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History: Four Theses, Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), 197-222 (p. 207)).

mask themselves within the seemingly unperturbable material identity of the object.⁴ Having successfully written themselves into the world in such a way as to have integrated with its material substantiality, they have, to all intents and purposes, become real. The world that we live in is one that is thoroughly shaped by - and invisibly reflects - the human at all levels, even that of its other; 'nature'.

That EuroWestern culture marginalises (and has marginalised historically) herbalist relationships with plants and their knowledges is a facet of its marginalisation of plants themselves (as this othered 'nature'). The concept of 'plant blindness' - an "extremely prevalent condition, whereby we struggle even to notice plants as being alive"⁵ has been widely mobilised within plant scholarship to problematise this exclusion. Although originally conceived as a corollary of human biology,⁶ I'm more inclined to agree with the assessment of Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira that "[t]he history of the relationship between humans and plants suggests [...] that the causal root of plant blindness goes beyond physiological underpinnings and harks back [...] to a deeply ingrained "cultural-philosophical attitude"".⁷ This deeply ingrained attitude (perhaps exacerbated by the EuroWestern privileging of the optic sense above all others) might be better described (in less ableist terms) as an obliviousness rather than an inability to see, or a 'backgrounding', to borrow a term from Val Plumwood.⁸ Plant lives and livelihoods are very different, rooted in different

⁴ This indelible being written-through of the material world with anthropocentric ideas and practice is exemplified in Jamie Linton's renaming of what we (contemporary inhabitants of EuroWestern culture) think of and encounter as 'water' as "modern water"; "a tremendous ally of drainage projects and the creation of hardened shorelines", circumscribed by the concerns and concepts of industrialised culture. 'Modern water' is constructed by its placelessness (or 'deterritorialisation'), for example, which transplants it from spring, well and river to "placeless discourses of hydrological engineering, infrastructural management, and economics". Or by the seeming absoluteness of its scientific designation as H₂O. Modern water, he argues, is integrally characterised by our estrangement from it; and this is how we encounter it. The accumulation of suppositions and ideas that are carried within the word 'water' are, when written back onto water itself as element and substance, invisibilised by the seeming immutability of its identity (this water that flows from the tap is the same water that falls from the skies; the same water that ever was). (Jamie Linton, *What is Water?: The History of a Modern Abstraction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), pp. 18-19.)

⁵ Gagliano et al., *Language*, p.viii.

⁶ Wandersee, James H. and Elisabeth E. Schussler, 'Preventing Plant Blindness', *The American Biology Teacher*, 61:2 (1999), 82-6 (83).

⁷ Gagliano et al., *Language*, p.viii. These last words are in quotation of Matthew Hall (*Persons*, p. 6).

⁸ Plumwood, *Feminism*, p. 21.

experiences of the world - or in different 'worlds' - arising from a different sort of (rooted) being. Culturally, we tend to consider 'being' in terms of human, and sometimes animal, kinds of being, which zoocentric framework categorically excludes the recognition of plants as worthy of associated (e.g. ethical) concerns. As many have pointed out, this matters within a context of human ecological destruction because, despite the straightforward truth that 'all life depends on plants', this devaluation and invisibilisation of their very existence has ontic repercussions: research remains vastly underfunded and conservation efforts unsupported.⁹ But more than this, plants are a part of us. Plants are a part of the ecological matrix of which our particularised being partakes and on which it is premised, where human being is being-in-common, and some of those with whom we are in-common are plants.

Herbalist practices of cultivating relationship with plants offer challenge to these cultural norms of plant obliviousness and anthropocentric abstraction-based thinking, as they have done historically. In herbalist-plant relationships we find heterogeneity and resistance within the context of EuroWestern cultural estrangement (troubling totalising disenchantment narratives and the binary that fetishises Indigenous cultures as other and enchanted).¹⁰ Moreover, an uptake of the poetic as a framework by which to understand them resists mapping them onto the practices of other cultures in the absence of a coherent cultural framework (whilst acknowledging entanglement and indebtedness). This is, of course, not to ignore that herbalism, as much as any other field of knowledge or practice, relies upon and benefits from abstract thinking too (beyond the banal fact of its inescapability, nobody would deny for, example, the value of being able to think in terms of a plant's herbal 'actions'). Where herbalism may be wary of this kind of thinking,

⁹ See, for example, Richard T. Corlett, 'Plant Diversity in a Changing World: Status, Trends, and Conservation Needs', *Plant Diversity*, 38 (2016), 10-16.

¹⁰ For example, in Abram, *Sensuous*.

however, is in its power to uproot herbal practice from its world-embedded contexts and ground it instead within abstractions; the monographs of scientific method, the brown-bottle preparations of global production and trade. As the line between medicine and poison is often one of dosage, so the helpfulness or hinderance of abstraction is typically one of degree. Non Shaw and Christopher Hedley open their *Herbal Book of Making and Taking* with the following words:

It's possible, these days, to practise herbal medicine without ever directly relating to the plants themselves. Believe it, or not, people do. This is wrong. The plants are our teachers. They teach us how to be in the world. Listen to them, play with them, be with them. This must be your "path with heart". Such a path can only be followed properly and fully with the plants that grow around us, in our gardens or in the wider environment. Even if you use bought-in and imported herbs be sure to follow this path as much as possible to keep you grounded and connected with nature.¹¹

As very practical urban herbalists, Shaw and Hedley were no shrinking violets (though they surely would have welcomed the appellation) in the face of modernity and its processes, however this passage appeals to a need for herbal practice to continue to conscientiously challenge the habits of grounding entirely within systems of modern abstraction. Modern WHM, whilst remaining essentially entangled with a holistic understanding, does not always require that its practitioners put down their books and venture into the world (where it does, for example, require an acquaintance with the terminology of actions and uses and the Linnaean taxonomy so necessary for the international trade of herbs). In his introduction to the handbook, Guy Waddell writes of Shaw and Hedley "[t]hey knew their patch like no one else" (Primrose Hill in London).¹² It is this kind of direct, connected, world-informed knowing - wherein the plants are centred - that characterises herbalism as a site of enduring enchantment within a cultural paradigm of rationalism, plant obliviousness, and entrenched, invisibilised

¹¹ Christopher Hedley and Non Shaw, *The Herbal Book of Making and Taking* (London: Aeon, 2020), p. xix.

¹² Guy Waddell, 'Introduction to Making and Taking' in Hedley and Shaw, *Making and Taking*, p. xv.

anthropocentrism.

Shaw and Hedley's 'knowing of their patch' reflects a localism that is characteristic of traditional forms of herbal practice. Within traditional herbalisms, plants make sense in a context of individual and community relationships to a locale and its flora. In her historical study of 'old wives' and their tales, Mary Chamberlain identifies a critical blow to their function in the 19th Century movement in Britain of the working classes from the countryside to urban slums. This movement "displaced the old wife from her traditional social base and, more crucially, from her source of ingredients" precipitating an "inevitable decrease in herbal lore, until now almost always transmitted orally, and the use of traditional herbal medicines".¹³ Even more acute is Jagtenberg and Evans' studies of Mapuche herbal practices in Chile: they find herbal knowledge to be tied to place and relationship to the extent that it is "only comprehensible within the context of Mapuche culture". Many of the herbs that are used within this medicine, they note, are not cultivated, as where a herb grows is intrinsic to its value (as well as the time of its harvest and accordant position of the moon).¹⁴ These models of intensely local knowledge they understand to be threatened by the universal models of global herbal medicine as they write themselves back onto Indigenous realities:

In our view global herbalism and the science and technology that support it are based in abstraction. That is, they are in the service and confirmation of general principles in the case of conventional science, and the global growth of capital in the case of industry. This desensitization to the special needs of "the local" has placed many indigenous cultures at risk and fuels the continuing opposition of herbalists, and many others, to the overexploitation of herbs. [...] Bureaucratic regulation and incorporation into systems and structures dominated by trans-national corporations are incompatible with traditional health systems. Only if local cultures are able to retain their own meanings and autonomy, such that

¹³ Chamberlain, p. 82.

¹⁴ Jagtenberg and Evans, p. 327.

shamanic (and related) practices are not disempowered by competing cultural practices, will these approaches flourish as viable alternatives, and perhaps even yet complementary systems of medicine and health.¹⁵

They regard this trend towards a globalised herbalism industry as reflective of a disenchanting or 'disgodded' conception of the natural and social world. Their analysis (drawn from observation of a particular cultural instantiation of herbalism but resonant with others) emphasises the fundamental incompatibility between localised practices of enchantment - the kind of upkeep of relationship with the world that enables you to 'know your patch' - and the scaleable, standardisable structures of both the industries and the ideologies of globalisation.

These three references reflect the deep entanglement of this kind of herbalist knowledge with place and physical context; which is to say, with the plants that grow in an area. Emplaced herbalist plant knowledge reflects the possibilities of knowing that plants themselves, as rooted beings, have. 'Making sense' in this way occurs in relation to the living world. The threat to Mapuche medicine occurs in a context wherein land and landscape offers knowledge in relation; the models of abstraction that seep into Mapuche herbal practices from global herbalism threaten to erase this relational specificity. Chamberlain's 'old wife' in the slums of Elizabethan London, removed from her familiar social and bioregional context, finds her medicine (and her status) decreased as the herbs disappear from her healing practice and she is left only with "the form - the charms and ceremonies" which appear increasingly anachronistic to an industrial urban context.¹⁶ And a century and a half later, Non Shaw and Christopher Hedley, surely not too far from where

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁶ Chamberlain, p. 83.

Chamberlain's old wife suffered her social misfortunes, recultivated a practice of plant-centred magic within the belly of the very same beast through a practice of close and loving attention to the plants of their 'patch'.

2.2 Turning to Plants: How to Learn From and Think With Plants?

I have characterised herbalism as a site of historical and ongoing resistance to the separation from nature that is characteristic of EuroWestern thought and culture. And we have seen that this cultural estrangement from the living world and the anthropocentrism of the conceptual framework through which we perceive it are mutually implicated and reinforcing. "At what epoch of their evolution", wonders Luce Irigaray, "and in the name of what necessity did humans split off from nature, and from themselves as nature, instead of cultivating nature? [...] I started inquiring about this evolution in my tradition, but also in others, and the presence or the absence of the vegetal world was often an indication of the time when humans began wandering through abstract elaborations and calculations aiming at mastering nature by means of technical logics or tools, instead of working toward its growing and blossoming, beginning with their own".¹⁷ Acknowledging, then, the failure of such strategies of separation and mastery, both ecologically and spiritually (indeed on Irigaray's account, the one implies the other), it makes sense that, in attempting to uproot ourselves from destructive paradigms of anthropocentrism, we turn (back) to plants. After all, plant-being is archetypally ecological. We're familiar of course with plants as symbolic of 'nature' (the excluded term in the constructed 'culture-nature' binary), but the being-ecological of plants vastly exceeds this

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Ebook, p. 60.

superficial equivocation; plants are profoundly expressive of an interimplicated, connective and fluid sort of being. Ebulliently transgressing our foundational metaphysical concepts - of time, of identity, of mind-body dualism¹⁸ - as well as sociobiological ones of sex and gender¹⁹ (meaning that plant-proper 'nature' also undoes invisibly and insidiously politicised constructions of the 'natural' in this regard)²⁰ - their very existence, if we are to admit it with integrity, challenges the structure of our thinking and the foundations of our culture. Depending on your perspective, there is very much to lose or gain. As Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira write:

Learning from plants entails thinking outside the totalizing categories of Western metaphysics and, therefore, paves the way for a more open-ended, less instrumental, approach not only to social relations but also to the environment.²¹

For an environmental ethics then, thinking with plants makes sense, as well as for ethics more broadly, and for our species survival. And for our own humanity as ecological beings. As queer nature-based artist James Aldridge writes, "there is no human/nature split, apart from in our thoughts".²² Plants have much to teach us.

All very well, but what does learning and thinking with plants actually mean? What does it actually involve? If it necessitates (as Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira write) 'thinking outside' our culturally ingrained paradigms of thought, this is surely no mean feat. The human-nature split exists only in our thoughts, and yet our thinking mediates all our world engagements. So how do we begin to do this? How to welcome plants back into our thoughts? How to learn from plants if hearing,

¹⁸ Marder, *Plant Thinking*.

¹⁹ Catriona Sandilands, *Fear of a Queer Plant?*, *Humanities Review*, GLQ, 23:3 (2017), 419-29.

²⁰ e.g. Caspar Heinemann writes "there is the potential for a queer identification with what is termed 'nature' to have positive political implications not just for queerness, but for a wider ecological and social struggles. When read against a binary understanding of human reproduction, flowers are inherently queer". Caspar Heinemann, 'Fucking Pansies: Queer Poetics, Plant Reproduction, Plant Poetics, Queer Reproduction', *Ecocore*, (2017) <<https://blog.ecocore.co/post/161819858724/fucking-pansies>> [accessed 17 May 2021], p. 4.

²¹ *Language*, p. xv.

²² James Aldridge, 'A Queer Path to Wellbeing', *ClimateCultures – Creative Conversations for the Anthropocene* [web article], (17 Aug 2020), <<https://climatecultures.net/signals-from-the-edge/queer-nature-wellbeing>> [accessed 17 May 2021].

speaking, or thinking in plant-compatible modes is no longer part of our culturally inherited skillset? To recognise an ecological foundation to our being is intellectually not so hard, but how to embody and honour it? To manifest and act according to this knowledge? How to actually, actively be(come)-with plants? A seminal text from Michael Marder within critical plant scholarship attempting to introduce 'plant thinking' into the fortified sphere of Western Metaphysics (and thus, iconoclastically, to precipitate its rupture) quickly finds itself up against certain limits of possibility. Emphasising (in acknowledgement of a long history of conceptual domination) a remedial preservation of plant alterity and ethical reticence as regards human intrusion into the otherness of the vegetal world, plants are left to be 'let be' "within the framework of what, from our standpoint, entails profound obscurity", on the edge of visibility:

To meet the plants themselves, the plants as such, is not the goal of this study, if only because, in the absence of identity, they are never "themselves" and because, resistant to idealization, they do not fit within the strict philosophical confines of the "as such." All we can hope for is to brush upon the edges of their being, which is altogether outer and exposed, and in so doing to grow past the fictitious shells of our identity and our existential ontology.²³

This approach is laudable within a philosophical framework (even if it does seem to risk leading back towards the self-preoccupied 'human') but not much use to those who seek to form functional, reciprocal working relationships with plants (good for philosophers; bad for plantworkers). It is an approach resonant with Brits and Gibson's notion of writers "address[ing] vegetal life to better comprehend their own artistic and academic genres".²⁴ It may enrich us within our respective conceptual spheres, but the point (for herbalists, and for this project) is to cultivate relationship.

Which thought again reminds us that the answer to the 'how' in the question of how

²³ *Plant Thinking*, pp. 9, 13.

²⁴ Gibson and Brits, p. 12.

to learn, or work, or think together with plants necessarily involves 'know-how' forms of knowledge. As Aristotle noted (with species superiority), plant being is not intellectual, but rooted, earthly and responsive. Developing relationship with plants necessitates to some extent coming to meet them upon these levels, finding ways to work outside of these habituated 'heads in the air' modes of being. Ryan, Vieira and Gagliano write: "working from practice allows us room to potentially get underneath the thought-language-habit nexus that habitually precludes our deep relationship with plants".²⁵ The 'underneath' here is a re-rooting in the opacity of earthly materiality. Getting out of our heads generally means 'going down' into the bodily; suspending our own cognitively habituated modes of being and working to reinvoke feeling, sense, intuition. Which motion of a stopping (suspending) and sinking into can be reiterated on multiple resonant levels: from our minds down into our bodies; our heads down into our feet (our roots); from the human-constructed world into deep ontological kinship (from factual reality into the ecological real).²⁶ Habituation is the result of habits, and embodied generative practice offers the possibility to break them; to step outside of the limiting patterns of our thought and thought-informed ways of being to see what else we might discover.

In suspending our own imposing thought-language structures through embodied practice, what we hope to allow space for is plant 'voices' - plant expressions of plant being and knowing. For these voices to be heard - for the possibilities of anything like conversation - it will do us well to make efforts towards learning some of the ways that plants themselves communicate.²⁷ It's hard to talk about this. Terms

²⁵ *Language*, p. xx.

²⁶ And as just intimated, this conceptual movement of 'going down' finds various iterations in the explorations of this project. Researcher 'working from practice' and herbalist working through 'sensory' and 'intuitive' means are two of them. Another is expressed by a herbalist quoted in Guy Waddell's work who describes their diagnostic work with patients as an attempt "to try and get a lower level, [...] it's what we always try and do, get down to the real meaning of life" (*Enchantment*, p. 222). Another is in the going back 'down' through emergent levels of abstraction within language to arrive at more fundamental iconic forms. More on all of this later.

²⁷ Gagliano, Vieira and Ryan term these the 'intrinsic' languages of plants; "the modes of communication and articulation used by vegetal species to negotiate ecologically with their biotic and abiotic environments." This in (not exclusive) contrast to those 'extrinsic' languages by which "scientists, theorists, writers, artists, and others express what is 'peculiar' [...] about plant being [...for example] the scientific language about plants (especially the taxonomic terminology that shapes how we speak

like 'voices', 'conversation', 'speech', 'language' bring up problems of anthropocentric limitations of meaning, and are perhaps inadequately analagous. Such terms are items of dissent and contention amongst plant scholars (and others who struggle to articulate plant articulations) and lines are drawn in diverse places for diverse reasons. However, to work to suspend or dislodge the habitual human within our going about our talking and listening (writing, thinking, acting) creates space for other possibilities to emerge. Here we might again note that a very practicable step in the endeavour of learning how to cultivate relationship with plants is to seek guidance from those who have already spent time developing these skills,²⁸ which strategy (one of the methodologies uptaken by this thesis) reflects the 'apprenticeship' form of learning that is a part of the herbal tradition as well as being, of course, a part of the oral transmission of the folk tradition.²⁹

2.3 Conceptualising a 'Poetic Approach' to Plantwork

The Concept of 'Approach'

We look then, to historically excluded, culturally marginalised herbalist engagement of plants as instructive. But how best to conceive these strange inter-species alliances? This thesis works on the premise that understanding herbalist-plant relationships through a poetic lens, and as forms of poetic practice, is a helpfully accommodating, and an appropriate mode of approach. A poetic framework is a

and think about the botanical world), the philosophical language deployed to articulate the particularities of plant ontology, and the representation of vegetality in literary works" (*Language*, p. xvii).

²⁸ See Hannah Pitt, 'On Showing and Being Shown Plants: A Guide to Methods for More-than-Human Geography', *Area*, 47:1 (2015), 48-55 (54); Hannah Pitt, 'An Apprenticeship in Plant Thinking' in *Participatory Research in More-Than-Human Worlds* ed. by Michelle Bastian, Owain Jones, Niamh Moore and Emma Roe (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 92-106.

²⁹ Anne Van Arsdall, 'Evaluating the Content of Medieval Herbals' in *Critical Approaches to the History of Western Herbal Medicine: From Classical Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Anne Stobart and Susan Francia (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 47-66 (p. 49); Catherine O' Sullivan, 'Determining Professional Identity: An Exploration of the Factors that Characterize the Nature of a Profession' in *Reshaping Herbal Medicine*, ed. by Catherine O' Sullivan (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 2005), pp. 15-33 (p. 36).

helpful and appropriate one for understanding/enacting plant-human engagements because it is resonant with a situated, sensory, embodied and ecological mode of being; and it is also (despite this divergence from a rationalist cultural norm), on account of its literary instantiations, appropriate to and familiar within our Eurowestern cultural heritage. What do I mean by a poetic approach? Firstly, some notes on the concept of 'approach'. To engage the poetic in this way invokes both senses of this word, as a noun and verb. In its dynamic sense as a movement of 'coming closer', it reflects the ecological understanding that we are always irreducibly and constitutively bound up with things that are not us, striving to traverse the difference. To approach something involves an orientation and movement towards it. In plantwork, this effort is ongoing and processual and never exhaustive (a complete knowledge of the other would dissolve the necessary distance of difference), meaning that understanding and relationships can always be deepened. Coming to know plants is an ongoing effort of active interest; it always involves some kind of approximation and there is always some element of interpretation and translation across borders. And the way that we come towards the world matters. Within our cultural paradigm, our habitual modes of approach to the plant world engender relations that conceal, categorise, subordinate and subsume, instrumentalise, obscure and exploit. Cody Delistraty, in reference to Monica Gagliano's work, sums up the problematic in a succinct epiphany: "[i]f plants can 'learn' and 'remember,' as Gagliano believes, then humans may have been misunderstanding plants, and ourselves, for all of history".³⁰ Perhaps a poetic approach as enacted by herbalist-plant relationships may offer us essential tools by which to remedy this millennia-ingrained 'misunderstanding' at the core of the EuroWestern paradigm.

³⁰ Cody Delistraty, 'The Intelligence of Plants', *The Paris Review* (September 26, 2019) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/09/26/the-intelligence-of-plants>> [accessed 17 May 21].

The Phenomenological Poetic

The idea of poetry in its literary guise as a space of creative potency and presence is well taken up within the phenomenological tradition, which draws knowledge from a position of lived, embodied, in-the-world experience. Here the interplay of sensuality and signification in poetic language is emphasised. "In poetry" writes Mikkel Dufrenne, "sense is totally within the sensuous. The meaning carried by the discourse is not signified, it is expressed. Signification becomes expression".³¹ Thus its comprehension involves an integral sensory engagement. It is "music made of words", which words fulfill their semantic function "in a very special way". Or again, "in poetry words are like things, palpable and tasty as a fruit. The kind of familiarity our body has with them is different". Or again, "[i]f you prefer, the sense surges within the sensuous in the reciting body as perfume surges within a flower in the heat of summer".³² Which is to say that within poetic 'sense', the sensual and the sensical are collapsed: the shape and feeling of words is a part of their meaning. Poetic language is language is invested with substance and sensuality. It is weighted, and rooted. And this sensuality is part of the way that it makes sense. It is also a part of its appeal; the way that poems as artworks appeal to us. The sensuality of poetic words is engaging. It is this depth (rather than transparency) that calls to us to stop and give our attention.

So, working with language as a creative medium, poetry (and more broadly literature, as the culturally accepted 'home' of poetry) has some power to counter a trend towards abstraction in language. "Here", says Dufrenne, "language is driven back to its origin". Which again, is not a regress, but rather a "re-grounding" within the possibility that precedes the fabrication of the world as "external and objective"; the return of language to "the pre-real... the ground on which the real is

³¹ Mikkel Dufrenne, 'The Phenomenological Approach to Poetry', *Philosophy Today*, 20:1 (1976), 13-19, (17).

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 16, 17.

founded".³³ Poetic language helps us to rediscover this 'pre-real' (that is, the grounding possibility for the everyday real) *through* the everyday real. Poetic words do not abandon abstract meaning, but work with it, and through it, back towards feeling and embodied sensory presence. This is the poetic gesture of creative worldmaking that phenomenology dis-covers within language. In David Abram's words, "at the heart of any language [...] is the poetic productivity of expressive speech".³⁴ This thesis takes up these ideas of the re-grounding capacities of poetic language. Or, even more precisely (and more broadly), what poetry does with language; the way it remakes the language that is its artistic medium. However the 'pre-real' that it seeks to rediscover is not that of the ontological truth of Being as such, but rather that of our ecological being.³⁵ There is no constraint here on what we can know. Rather, a conceptual understanding of ecological interimplication is taken as a premise; and the poetic engaged as a *way of relating* that foregrounds connection.

The phenomenological understanding of the poetic as a connective, world-disclosing way of being in the world - and the forgotten truth of everyday language - finds precedent in the work of Martin Heidegger.³⁶ In recognition of the ways that our thought, language, and concepts (each of which involve a significant degree of social determination) have a tendency to dominate or to foreclose the world as we encounter it, obscuring particularity, Heidegger sought to cultivate a mode of thinking - and of saying, and of 'dwelling' - that 'dis-closes' things in their 'essence', uncovering rather than concealing, and 'letting beings be' themselves.³⁷ To 'let

³³ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁴ Abram, p. 34.

³⁵ According with Abram's project and expanded understanding of language as ecologically grounded.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, 'Language' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001) p. 208.

³⁷ It's easy to see, on such a picture, how these codifying, 'concealing' mechanisms of thought and language serve cultural paradigms of domination and instrumentalisation - capitalist economics; white supremacy; patriarchy - and do not sit easily with an ecological recognition of the world as autonomous, interdependent, unpredictable, and alive. Heidegger himself, of course, was notoriously embroiled within the contemporary cultural manifestations of these ideologies of domination - and at the same time denied worldmaking agency to plants and animals - on which seeming incongruities much has been written. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with these issues here, but I point to work from (plant scholar and

beings be' requires an adjustment within the movement of thought; a "step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is, explains – to the thinking that responds and recalls".³⁸ It is a way of coming to the encounter with a certain spaciousness of thinking such that we cultivate an openness and receptivity to - we clear a space for - the particularities of things as they are in themselves. This isn't an abandonment of the knowledge we already have. Rather, we recognise this pre-existent knowledge of the meaningfulness of things, and temper its foreclosures (rather than unthinkingly projecting these meanings onto the world and then reading them back from it). Thus we create space within thought for the presencing of things in themselves, rather than foreclosing these possibilities in advance with habitual understandings. In this way, for Heidegger, we put our thinking in the service of our relationship to the world, clearing and creating space for mutual exchange and co-responding. The space given to the thing by this careful, responsive kind of thought simply allows it to shine in the fullness of its being through the form of its social identity.

Heidegger understood this kind of thinking as poetic, in that it reveals the truth of being. It is a conception that re-roots the 'poetic' in its etymologically originary (from the Greek) ground of *poiesis*: a particular sort of 'making' in which the contribution of the creative act is emphasised (Heidegger takes up the term to designate a creative act that brings hidden or potential elements of existence into a state of presence, across a creative relation). Poetry is that capacity of creative re-making by which humans (and for Heidegger, problematically, only humans, on account of their unique possession of language) are able to say, and thus bring to light, the being of the (rest of the) world (whose way of being is to be unreflexively co-existent with itself):

phenomenologist) Michael Marder on the subject. Michael Marder, *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 179.

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being *from out of* their being. [...] Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is. [...] Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world.³⁹

Which is to say that 'poetry', in Heideggarian terms, designates something fundamental and essential. It is an original gesture of creative worldmaking that illuminates that which it speaks, pulling it out of unconcealment and into truth. It is primarily a dynamic of ontological relation. It is this originary gesture that infuses both art and language with its constitutive vitality; "language preserves the original nature of poetry" and all art (including the literary sort of poetry, which Heidegger names 'poesy') is in nature poetic.⁴⁰

It is, then, for Heidegger, the gap of difference engendered by naming or saying that, in the re-presentation of the thing, pulls it out of its unconcerned self-coincidence; whether this self-coincidence that of the 'mere' being of objects, or that absorption in life - in the 'real', the 'Open', "the drift and wind of the whole draft"⁴¹ - that is the being of the rest of the living world ('Nature'). But we can recognise this as the gap that, in the successive iterations of emergent language, develops into those abstractions that then function to foreclose and determine. This is just a consequence of the way that language, and our language-structured thinking, each serve the function of both ontic and ontological articulation. That is to say, they can represent the world to us, and to others with whom we interact, practically and efficiently in those of its most pertinent aspects (typically, those that have to do with our everyday getting on with our lives), and they can also dis-close the world to us in its ontological truth. Thus, it is precisely *how we engage with our language and*

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 71.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, 'Origin', *Poetry*, p. 72

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, 'What are Poets For?' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 106.

thought that makes the difference: “[e]verything depends on the step back, fraught with error, into the thoughtful reflection that attends the turnabout of the oblivion of Being”.⁴² Heidegger’s own writing reflects this effort; the language itself is a form of thinking, tasked to unconceal and discover. Thus, it commits itself to language’s originary gesture; the “illuminating projection” of poetic thought.⁴³ That the step back is fraught, and language, in its dual functionality, so prone to abstracting, and the movement of thought so prone to foreclosing, requires this kind of careful commitment and attentiveness:

The responding must take into account all of this, on the strength of long concentration and in constant testing of its hearing, if it is to hear an appeal of Being. But precisely here the response may hear wrongly. In this thinking, the chance of going astray is greatest. This thinking can never show credentials such as mathematical knowledge can. But it is just as little a matter of arbitrariness [...] On the contrary, it is only a possible occasion to follow the path of responding, and indeed to follow it in [...] complete concentration of care and caution toward Being.⁴⁴

The responsibility then is all ours; a poetic thought is one that constantly strives to hear what is essential and particular, through abstraction, despite a constant possibility of error.

Heidegger aligned this relating well to the world at large - a poetic dwelling in the world - as a mode of philosophical truth (*aletheia*) which he understood as a function precisely of its capacities to reveal and disclose the world; ‘the Being of beings’. This active disclosure, for Heidegger, reveals something about language itself, as something that both ‘founds’ and ‘reveals’ the world (and thus *aletheia* was understood as the purview of humans - the sole possessor of language). But the point of this thesis is not philosophical discovery, but learning how to relate well to

⁴² Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, *Poetry*, p. 183.

⁴³ Heidegger, ‘Origin’, *Poetry*, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, *Poetry*, pp. 181-2.

plants. The poetic is uptaken as a way of working within the relation *through* the structuring frameworks of our situated positionality. Working within our own (habitually abstracted) forms of thought and language, a poetic framework of approach can help open them to the more fundamental expressive flows of meaning of the living world at large. Plant ways of expressing themselves, plant meanings. Thus the vibrancy of the world that a poetic approach discloses is not that of the presence of Being as such, but the particular, self-determined, meaningful presence of myriad lively beings very different from ourselves.

An Expanded Conception of the Poetic as a Bridge to Plant Being

A poetic approach (to language, to thinking, to the world) is transformative of the word, or the world, that it remakes, and it is also transformative of us ourselves, as implicated, co-responding creators. It engenders an inhabitation of the sensual, embodied elements of the creative process, situating us in a collaborative relationship with the material (the word-ly or the worldly). From this engaged, respons-ible position in the thick of it, where thought (or language) comes into play, it, too, begins to thicken. A poetic approach introduces the worldly and the sensual into thought. This kind of thinking facilitates resistance to the abstractions of our anthropocentric, economic, everyday worlds, and (this thesis contends) can bring us closer to the ecological workings of the plant world; the kinds of thinking, and knowing, and being that plants do. Gagliano and Grimonprez identify two potential ways of bridging the divide as far as language is a barrier for human-plant relations; either we can expand our understanding of what language is to accomodate plant ways of communicating, or we can bring our language closer to that of plants.⁴⁵ Employing the tools of the poetic in our language and our thinking can facilitate

⁴⁵ Monica Gagliano & Mavra Grimonprez, 'Breaking the Silence - Language and the Making of Meaning in Plants', *Ecopsychology*, 7:3 (2015), 143-52 (146).

both, as we create space within our words and ideas both for new meanings and connections, and also for new animating communicative flows; the gestural, the feeling, the sensory.

Outside of the philosophical jargon of phenomenology, the idea of 'poetic license' encapsulates this expansive, accommodating nature of the poetic. This is the space given for subjectivity, interpretation, the non-usual and the creative. Where other languages are more tightly constrained by rules and rigidity, the poetic has this understood leeway of flexibility and play built into it.⁴⁶ It allows for different perspectives. 'Poetic license' then, pushes the boundaries of possibility of what we may do with thought and language, offering a leeway of creative experimentation, demarcating a far larger space - in language, and thought and, on our expanded definition, in doing in general, to play with. The term designates something that feels a bit wayward, a bending of the rules. But perhaps, within a more expansive and de-anthropocentred understanding of what language is, this leeway might (eventually) not be needed. The abstract language that is standard of our rationalism-rooted culture, and of our everyday thought-habits, could be one possible mode among others. Perhaps we might not need the descriptor 'poetic' at all, but could understand these modes as our 'world-thinking', or our 'together-with-plants-thinking' - or simply 'thinking' as opposed to, say, 'conceptualising'. For Heidegger, language, if used well, has the power to speak the truth of Being. Indeed 'truth' is (re)conceived precisely as this act of dis-closure, and thus, for Heidegger, it is only those who possess the power of language (humans) that can live in truth or authenticity. But perhaps, also, 'language' (or another term if desired), when understood in all of its extensive more-than-human compass, speaks diverse 'truths' of diverse beings; discloses the world in different ways. The notion of nature as passive and inert is well inscribed within Western philosophy all the way

⁴⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer characterises poetic license as a freedom from reference (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Eminent Text and Its Truth', *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 13:1 (1980), 3-10 (7).

from Aristotle's 'Great Chain of Being'. But, in understanding plants as alive, agential, meaning-ful, perhaps the artistic intention of the *poietic* act might be understood as a feature of the lives of plants too.

So, to reiterate, my use of the term 'poetic' invokes a deep sense of '*poiesis*', referencing a relationship of creative, collaborative solicitation of the singularity of the world around us; which vibrancy we recognise (not just as indicative of originary concealed human gestures, or of an abstract concept of Being, but) as a feature of the aliveness of the world, as full of agential living beings - including plants. So partially, when I say 'poetic', I really mean '*poietic*'. But (!...) I also mean 'poetic' in its commonplace sense (as it refers to the cultural literary practice of poetry - of creating it and of hearing or reading it), because - as Dufrenne's characterisation of the sensuous, appealing, expressive, regrounding operations of poetry reminds us - poetry is the preserve of *poiesis* in language, which is the medium in which we think and work. Despite then its cultural disempowerment as 'literature',⁴⁷ traces of the world-involved, participatory origins of language and thought remain within the workings of poetic language. That is, within the poetic as a culturally familiar, if disarmed, preserve of the *poietic* can be recognised these roots of the creative, interpretative remaking of the world that characterises fundamental thinking. 'Poetry', in its *poietic* capacity, remakes with words; poems are constructed by their creators and then remade a little each time in the reading. In fact, we find this connection in herbalism in the word 'pharmacopoeia'. A pharmacopoeia is a form of herbal; works of instruction for the making of remedies. In this word, poets and herbalists are connected together in their common heritage as creators. Artfully crafting new creations (poems and remedies) from their respective materials.

Thus, working with this expanded understanding, a poetic framework is one that has

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, "'...Poetically Man Dwells...'" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 211.

capacity to link us back to the earthly reality of world and land. Perhaps I am using a bit of 'poetic license' in describing human-plant relations as poetic, in reference to this common conceptual root. But, again, the linguistic element of 'the poetic' is also important. I want to give special acknowledgement to the way that our own, culturally-determined, human way of being is thoroughly written through with (highly conceptual and conventionalised) language. That it structures the ways that we think, and the ways that we interact with the world, and the world itself that we live in. And that this is a thing that is characteristic of how we experience and engage with reality, and is characteristic of our being in differentiation from that of plants (which is not to deny plants the possibility of language). The linguistic element of 'the poetic', as a particular kind of language, or way of using language (that is, the poetic as it relates to the field of 'literature') is important because, in taking language as its medium (the material of creative remaking), poetry signals a way *through* the 'thought-language-habit nexus' that structures our relation to world. This 'through' is critical. It means that we are not abandoning anything of our (culturally determined) selves, or attempting to transcend our world-embeddedness, or overcome our human semiotic situation; but attempting to work *from within* it. The subsumption of the poetic within the literary (as a cultural pursuit) disarms its *poietic* potential, but applying the tools of literary engagement to 'the real' repotentises them again. We are not meant to treat (consciously, intentionally) reality as fictions or fictions as reality; poetic license is for poets and poetry! Thus applying the tools of the poetic to our world relations disrupts the safety of literature as a cultural pursuit, and the safe self-referencing of abstract, emergent language as a tool of human creation. And treating plants as persons - as teachers, or as our kin - does this too, disrupting the assumed hierarchisation of life that has allowed for a cultural enshrouding of our lives in an anthropocentrically reflective world, in which 'nature' is a subordinated other and all other life forms are regarded as resources for our usage. It is for this reason that the poetic is potent as an approach for human-plant relations.

2.4 Reflections on the Entanglement of Plants and the Poetic

There are other reasons too. The poetic is a human framework; it pertains to herbalists rather than plants. It is a mode of relation shaped by the kind of linguistic-thought-being that is characteristic of human realities. But I take it up upon the premise that there is also something of plants themselves that accords with the poetic, as the phenomenologists conceived it to connect with the originary expressive gesture that is at the heart of language.⁴⁸ Which is to say that a poetic manner of approach is one that is appropriate to plant ways of being. That it resonates with, and can accommodate the unruly complexities, the lively entanglements, the non-linear temporalities of the plant world. Its potency as epistemological practice goes further than human-plant relations; however, my choice to focus on plantwork as a site wherein to explore these strategies of world-engagement acknowledges something special about these kinds of practice. It honours the ways that plant-centred herbal practice has always been, and continues to be, a site in which poetic practices already find root; in which a tendency towards the fully sensuous and the imaginative over the narrowly optic and intellectual is intuitive, and whose ecological frameworks emphasise relation and incorporate such poetic elements as syncretism and resonance. It is also disproportionately within the realms of poetry or fiction that we find plants given agency and autonomy or characterised in ways that invoke personhood⁴⁹ – the 'poetic license' of these

⁴⁸ I make the statement that 'the poetic is a human framework' in the same way that 'language' is a human framework and to attempt to use it to understand and accommodate plant communication is fraught. At the same time, I do not wish to reinstate essential divisions here, as Heidegger does, for example, in his characterisation of the being of plants as *phusis* - an unfolding or emerging from itself (the blossoming of a rose) in distinction to the artistic remaking of *poiesis* wherein things come into being across a creative relation. We will, in fact, see that this distinction is challenged by plants' ecological inter-relationships, including co-creative herbalist-plant relationships, and by the conception of plant artistry considered in the final chapter of this work.

⁴⁹ As well as in myth; see Hall, *Imagination*.

spaces allows room for the attribution of characteristics that cannot be accommodated within the bounds of 'reality'.⁵⁰

The phenomenological conceptualisation of the poetic characterised it as sensuous, earthly, excessive and appealing. Where our habitual language often tends towards a weightless transcendence with increasing abstraction, poetic language typically does the opposite, weighing itself down with multiple meanings, filling itself with felt sense. With poetic words, often, we feel the sound of them in our mouths; they find location in our bodies. They have permeable edges, opening themselves up for relation with each other and the world. It is language that is beyond merely functional – language that allows itself 'license' beyond its own edges. And, in fact, the descriptor 'poetic', in common usage, often implies these characteristics of excess. These tendencies are echoed in plants. Try as we might to control them with monoculture, agriculture, garden culture; to incorporate them into our designs, plants have a tendency to overspill the human. The edges of the fields will always be populated with weeds, and gardens left unattended will always revert back to long grasses, or dandelions or bramble tangles. Wildflowers cross-pollinate with garden escapees. This overspilling of human control is designated 'wild' and this inherent wildness is one reason that plants have figured so deeply in poetic imagination.⁵¹ Beyond the more obvious areas of human world-restructuring, plant life flourishes. Leaving the cities, plants are what you tend to encounter - in fields, meadows, hedges, woodlands, scrub, brush and heath. Plants are typically definitive of non-human structured spaces in the human imagination - the 'green' spaces, the 'wild' spaces, are quite synonymous in our imaginations with abundant plant life. Plants are by far the most visible, manifest and prevalent (perceptible) other-than-human life forms within human experience.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the alignment of the literary imagination (in contrast to philosophy) with plant being see too: Michael Marder and Patrícia Vieira, 'Writing Phytophilia: Philosophers and Poets as Lovers of Plants', *Frame*, 26:2 (2013), 37-53.

⁵¹ By which I mean to say that ('wildness' is, of course, a human construct, but) what this concept designates is something that is integral to plants, and to our relationship to them (their otherness, and their tendency to overspill human control).

Another reason for the deep figuration of plants in the poetic imagination is that, in their uncultivated presence, plants are indicatively local. They factor definitively into the character of a landscape, or of a bio-region. They can tell us stories about the earth beneath our feet and the geology of the land, indicating ancient volcanoes or the powdered bodies of primaevial sea-creatures, recently cleared forest or industrial waste grounds. They can tell us, in a landscape, which way the wind blows, and where the sun rises. In this way, plants can connect us to place, helping us to root and feel a sense of belonging in a way that can cut through the estrangement of dwelling within abstract systems and human-structured worlds. Within traditional and Indigenous cultures, plants are a definitive feature in human relationship to place – are a part of those places within which those cultures make sense.⁵² But it doesn't necessarily have to be 'our' land, or the land that we are 'from'. Sometimes plants can offer a gateway of connection to otherwise foreign or unknown spaces. It's always a delight for me to recognise familiar flora in unfamiliar terrains; even surrounded by the concrete blankness of train station platforms (the setting that Heidegger chose to characterise existential boredom), I have sometimes regrounded myself by connecting with the tiny weeds that are sprouting in the middle of the tracks.

In addition to this, plants are essential to the sustenance of life. They contain within their being the continuation of our own lives. They link human realities to unseen forces, taking energy from the sun, and minerals from the earth, and transforming them, within their own bodies, into formats that are utilisable by our own. The fairly direct relations that we have with plants (mostly, today, eating them, but traditionally weaving them for cloth, carving them for tools, 'reading' them for knowledge of

⁵² See, for example, Joseph, Leigh/styawat, 'Walking on Our Lands Again: Turning to Culturally Important Plants and Indigenous Conceptualizations of Health in a Time of Cultural and Political Resurgence', *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 16:1 (2021), 165-79.

weather and the land) in turn connects us with other even less comprehensible players in the larger energetic cycles of which we are a part. And, of course, with plants themselves as living beings, possessive of a vital, characterful, meaningful existence. As other-than-human living beings, they are exemplary. They are wondrous to meet because they share many relatable characteristics of life whilst being, at the same time, unassimilably alien. Moreover, despite the long human history of plant collection and cultivation, and their importance to human existence as food, shelter, fuel and medicine, the world of plants still harbours an element of integral wildness as excess that is characteristic of even our 'plant-oblivious' cultural relationship to them. Even a potted geranium or garden tomato resists definition entirely in terms of its usefulness to us in the way that human-created objects do not, retaining a character of its own as a living thing. That is, of course, a reason that we enjoy them. Similarly, the understanding of plants as teachers acknowledges both their evolutionary success and variety and the wealth of knowledge inherent in their radically different embodied experiences of world (as, for example, rooted and photosynthesising) - and thus the knowledge to be gained from them. Meeting plants in this way – as living entities with their own purposes and ends – is a way that we are able to move beyond the encasement of the culturally determined human-structured worlds in which we have made ourselves homely and comfortable. Plants can offer entirely new perspectives on being. And sometimes (as is frequently the case in encounters with entheogenic plant beings) these can be deeply profound existential experiences, sometimes reconfiguring entirely what we thought we knew of ourselves and our world.

Within the spectrum of plant-oriented practices, herbalism has always occupied a position in the interstices of the human-world relationship. In its traditional forms, it is inherently ecological as an activity and might even be regarded as inherently spiritual by virtue of its traditional vitalist underpinnings. Within Ireland and the British Isles, a lineage can be traced of an indigenous Celtic tradition of 'magic'

herbalism and world-rooted knowledge,⁵³ and it has been argued that “the Western materia medica, with its basis in folklore may be considered as part of the surviving TK [traditional knowledge] of the West”.⁵⁴ In ‘Global Herbal Medicine: A Critique’, Jagtenberg and Evans take as a premise “the idea that the traditions of herbal medicine (in the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia) have common cultural roots in shamanism and Nature worship - practices that have provided humanity’s most archaic psychocultural memories and that remain relevant to our understandings of the past and future of herbalism and ‘natural health’”, finding that “[t]hese earliest cultural-spiritual practices survive in many indigenous cultures as well as in many forms of natural and complementary medicine and, for some, continue to underpin the search for ecological sustainability and personal health”.⁵⁵ They warn of the threat to this integral ecological vitalistic character of herbalism from the contemporary globalisation of herbal medicine which, more and more, sees the standardisation and regularisation of herbal practice in conflict with its traditional socio-cultural embeddedness, in a way that threatens Indigenous cultures, their lands and ecologies. And yet, they note, even within the more mainstream capitalist instantiations of WHM’s practices (although perhaps the industrialised production of herbal remedies begins to transgress it), the vitalistic and holistic worldviews that underpin Indigenous and traditional herbalism persists, with scientific biomedical approaches blended with a philosophy that holds “the underlying assumption that life and health depend on energetic processes and a fundamental *life force*”.⁵⁶ Herbalism is integrally ecological and holistic, concerned

⁵³ See, for example, Charles Wagner, Jillian De Gezelle and Slavko Komarnytsky, ‘Celtic Provenance in Traditional Herbal Medicine of Medieval Wales and Classical Antiquity’, *Frontiers in Pharmacology*, 11:105 (2002) <doi: 10.3389/fphar.2020.00105>; Beith, *Healing Threads*. It is, of course, in those parts of the Western European Isles where Romanisation was not a force that these lineages are most clearly visible.

⁵⁴ Evans, ‘Changing the Knowledge Base’, p. 2100.

⁵⁵ Jagtenberg and Evans, p. 321.

⁵⁶ Jagtenberg and Evans, p. 325. The term ‘energetics’ is widely used within herbism and Kathryn Niemeyer identifies it as “one of WHM’s foundational beliefs” (‘Personalizing WHM’, p. 27). She explains: “[t]he concept of energetics represents an attempt to understand whole self-organizing systems. Both the person and the herbs are appreciated as whole complex systems and patients are treated out of consideration that the problem or imbalance, excess or deficiency, is from multiple irreducible factors informed by each person’s physiologic, emotional, social, and family environments, and is contextualized by the person’s history and experienced life” (ibid., p. 26). Elisabeth Brooke also offers analysis of the function of this concept

with the replenishment and maintenance of balance within the whole. As a field of practice, it upholds a relationship to world that is poetic, in a fundamental sense.

Summary

Our engagement with the world is mediated by the structuring impositions of our language, thought and habits, which are shaped by the dualisms and the entrenched abstractions of EuroWestern rationalism. The influence of these structuring abstractions are such that the world that we operate within is thoroughly shaped by, and reflective of, anthropocentric influence, even at the level of (othered, oppositional) 'nature'. Yet 'in its depths', this abstract emergent thought/language is a function of our deep ecological implication, drawing force from the expressive interplay of, and animating in turn, the living world. This is the poetic gesture at the heart of language. With these premises, this project considers the prospect that culturally latent capacities of collaborative worldmaking can be excavated from culturally familiar practices of poetic engagement, offering a pathway to ecological world relations that is appropriate to and practicable for a modern EuroWestern industrialised culture. One that can help us to cultivate a caring, creative attunement to the living world. And particularly, for the focus of this project, to plant others. And it recognises these kinds of approaches as already characteristic of the work of many herbalists who seek to cultivate such relationships.

In conceiving of herbalist relationships with plants as enacting forms of poetic practice, it expands those philosophical conceptions of the poetic as world construction and world dis-closure that nonetheless retain an anthropocentric

within WHM: "[e]nergetics" (a term borrowed from Traditional Chinese Medicine) has become acceptable. It is a term that sanitizes the magical nature of herbs, and provides a language which does not offend or confront" (*Traditional WHM*, p. 21).

conception of the world beyond the human as less alive. A poetic approach in practice, within the context of plantwork, works through language and linguistically informed thought and habit to open them to the communicative flows of the world as already alive, agential, responsive, communicative; which is to say, onto the vibrant particularity of plant being. In this, it is a form of regrounding and a reconnection; a 'going down' through the 'thought-language-habit nexus' of our emergent world-being to realise and enact our ecological interimplication; our being-with plants. This 'realising' and 'enactment' is descriptive of a poetic approach as a theoretical framework that is fundamentally practical and situated within relationship, rather than just descriptive. In common language, the leeway of 'poetic licence' recognises this expansive inclusivity of the poetic comparative to other modes of thought. This thesis works with this capaciousness in taking up a poetic framework of approach to accommodate herbalist-plant relationships as sites of knowledge and amplify them, enacting an understanding of plants as knowledgeable, and of our own being as fundamentally plant-entangled.

A poetic theoretical framework is understood then as appropriate to an exploration of herbalist-plant relations on account of its accommodation of knowledges typically otherwise excluded by EuroWestern epistemologies, by way of a set of tools that are a part of EuroWestern culture. It is also appropriate because it accords with herbalism's own traditions and, in conceiving of herbalism in more capacious terms (as an art, as an ecological ethics, as perhaps incorporating elements of spirituality... but most importantly, as a form of relationship between plants and people), offers herbalism opportunities for re-rooting in its own traditions. And, finally, I contend that human-plant relations within folk herbal practices have traditionally been a site of poetic engagement because of the resonance of poetic modes of approach with plant ways of being; in other words, a poetic approach is one that lends itself to and is appropriate to plant ways of being. Which ideas will be explored in the next chapters.

PART TWO

'IN THE FIELD': POETIC PLANTWORK
PRACTICES

Introduction to Part Two

The first part of this work introduced the aims and concerns of this inquiry, locating these within a historical and cultural context and locating the project itself within the fields of plant scholarship and herbalist practice. It also began to consider a poetic approach as one that, in its capaciousness and sensuality, potentially accords well with plant modes of being (as rooted, excessive and ecological), and with the kinds of human-plant relationships and their (embodied, emplaced, relational) knowledges that herbalism often engenders - and, too, with the ambitions of this project to affirm (rather than interrogate) these relationships and knowledges. This second part now turns to contemporary plant-entangled forms of herbalist praxis, bringing the understandings of the first part to bear upon them in a way that seeks to accommodate and create space for the relationships that they cultivate and the knowledges that they facilitate. By choosing theoretical and methodological frameworks that favour accommodation and amplification, this project seeks to discover what we might learn from herbalist practices of working together with plants; to unearth their implications and illuminate their radical potential. In particular, it wonders whether herbalist-plant relationships might offer instruction for 'right relationship' with the world, which is to say, for working through our culturally inherited and internalised paradigms of human supremacism (paradigms that background and instrumentalise plants) and towards ecological ones.

This part is loosely organised into four sections exploring context, attention, response and articulation as structural elements of plant encounters. These categories (my own choice of terms) reflect something of a model of 'conversation' (a term often used by herbalists to describe their interactions with

plants) - and could also be correlated with interactions with texts. But this is also an artificial over-categorisation. In reality, herbalist-plant encounters comprise a dynamic interplay of mutually attentive and responsive articulations, full of feedback loops and growth and development as part of a process of reciprocal relationship-building that echoes the complexity and entanglement of ecological processes of emergence. Within each section, particular elements of herbalist engagements with plants (again their demarcation should not be taken too definitively; many overlap with each other) are considered through a lens of poetic practice, and their functions and implications explored by means of diverse theoretical insights from plant scholarship, the post-humanities and elsewhere. We zoom in now, then, to look at herbalist-plant encounters, to consider their import as ecologically constructive and radically potent, and to learn from them.

Chapter Three: Creating Space; Remaking Worlds

Introduction

This chapter considers the ways that space, broadly defined, is reconfigured to be supportive of interactions with plants. The work of creating space - physical, mental, temporal - for plantwork involves an effort of resistance to the anthropocentric structure and rationalist values of our cultural milieu. As frequently delimited against this broader, less conducive, context, working within and through the existent, these reconfigured intentional spaces can help illuminate (in negative) the inscribed and naturalised (plant backgrounding) logics that underpin it as social constructions. Sometimes these bounded spaces involve an active materialisation of intention. Very often, the act of creating space upon one level facilitates space on others. Thus these acts are frequently sites of crossing between different aspects of being - emotions, one's sense of spatio-location, one's sense of identity and belonging - reflecting, again, herbalism's characteristic occupation of a position of complex and connective liminality. Often they are a form of constructive world-making, remaking space as written through with intentionality in a way that has the capacity to endure or instigate shifts. The first half of this chapter ('Creating Space') considers these various kinds of intentional spaces and the ways that they intersect, functioning as points of crossing. The second half ('Creating Culture') takes these insights and broadens their scope to understand the ways that culture also functions - and has functioned traditionally - as a space of holding for plantwork practices and knowledge and to understand culture creation as another form of space-making in this regard.

3.1 Creating Space

Mental/Emotional/Individual Space

A primary way that plantworkers create supportive space for plant interactions is on the level of thought and of the emotions. Chapter Two considered the herbalist desire to cultivate relationship with plants within a wider cultural context of ‘plant obliviousness’; a corollary of the anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism that structure it. I drew a connection between the ‘poetic’ practices of certain strands of contemporary herbalism and the quieted tradition of plant-entangled healing practices that were largely excluded from legitimated medical practice and from history, but continue to endure quietly in the margins nonetheless. Turning to herbalist praxis, Nathaniel Hughes also draws these connections explicitly, situating his work and his methods in what he sees as historically ubiquitous relationships of learning with plants, which relations he understands as expressive of innate human capacities:

It’s just how it is, and it always has been: that people throughout history have learned from the plants directly. And it’s not actually that difficult to do because we all have an innate ability to do it. The problem is we are all so conditioned to ignore the subtle responses from our body that we overlook it. It’s almost as if it’s a very quiet voice in a very loud world. It’s just a little whisper. And then something about our culture is like a hundred radios, on full volume, all the time. So to really listen to that little whisper is actually really hard [...] but I’ve never seen anyone not find it. Some people struggle more than others, but it’s always there. And a lot of the skill is in quieting these other radios.¹

For Hughes then, and many others, learning, or relearning to interact with plants as

¹ Eatweeds, ‘Nathaniel Hughes on Intuitive Herbalism’, Plants and People, podcast, 29 November 2016 < <https://www.eatweeds.co.uk/ep11> > [accessed 17 May 2021].

living beings necessitates a shift from certain culturally conditioned ways of being to a way of being that resonates more with those of plants: slower, calmer, more embodied, more present. He continues:

For me, the fundamental first step is about coming into stillness yourself. If you're constantly in an intellectual or a mental state, if you're constantly busy, if you're constantly moving around, if you find it difficult to just sit still and be with yourself [...] that's crucial, because, at first, these seem to be quite subtle voices and if you've got all this activity going on, it's very hard to hear them.²

A clearing of space within one's own thoughts then is the first step towards creating space for the recognition of plant being.

Clare Holohan also names "making time and space" as the first practical step towards "being able to be a bit more still and centred" for her interactions with plants.³ This typically involves finding ways of "cancelling the background noise" and quieting distractions ("turning off your mobile phone and switching off your computer"). It is sort of a suspension of the everyday, with its endless flow of pulls, distractions and obligations, and the delimiting of a calmer, more 'centred' space within it. Indeed, she has set up her life in a way that supports this kind of making space:

Moving out of the city, as well, was a big thing for me. Getting away from - not that I was ever in the rat race! - but getting away from that kind of mentality and that kind of situation and moving up to the Highlands where you are forced to switch off and there's just not much going on!

This delimitation of an enabling space of focus is typically regarded as requisite for practices of attentiveness and tuning in (tea tasting for example, as we'll look at in

² Ibid.

³ All unreferenced herbalist quotations (from Clare Holohan, Nathaniel Hughes, Carole Guyett, Nikki Darrell and Cristina Cromer) henceforth are from interviews.

the next chapter) in order to “step into [a] place of receptivity”.⁴ Even if it is possible to interact with plants without having created a supportive mental and emotional space first, most herbalists who work with plants as living beings would nonetheless consider this aspect critical.

For Holohan, the impact of the mental and emotional states that she brings to an interaction with a plant goes beyond the moments of the interaction itself to affect the character and quality of the physical medicines that are produced from it:

When I’m [...] harvesting and working with the plants [...] I try not to do it when I’m not feeling in a good headspace, because I feel like that definitely affects the energy of the medicine. So trying to be a bit more positive and feeling like I’m in a good place, mentally and emotionally myself.

The intangible qualities of the emotional and mental space of the meeting or the making are inscribed in enduring form in the medicine, which will eventually express itself again in the body (and perhaps the feeling and the psyche) of whoever takes it. In this conception we see the way that the creation of space on one level or within one domain of being is reflected upon and creates resonances within others. A person’s ‘headspace’ helps to determine the space of the encounter; traces of which may eventually reverberate through the physical space of the patient’s body. A complementary counterpoint is found in Carole Guyett’s advocacy of fasting (or a restricted diet) as a means of preparation for and during ceremonial plant dieting, which process, involving the ritual ingestion of plants, is understood to facilitate development “at physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels” and help participants to “develop a close relationship with a plant”.⁵ This “purification” by means of the restriction of physical consumption “helps us to be receptive to the

⁴ Nikki Darrell, *Conversations With Plants: The Path Back to Nature* (London: Aeon, 2020), p. 94.

⁵ Carole Guyett, *Sacred Plant Initiations: Communicating with Plants for Healing and Higher Consciousness* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Company, 2015), p. 62.

plant, and it also facilitates healing by making our issues more accessible”;⁶ the clearing of space within the body facilitates non-physical effects. In each of these examples, the mental/emotional and the physical, the individuated and the shared, are entangled and inter-affective: action on one plane manifests on another. These kinds of conceived and intended crossings and entanglements are characteristic of plantworker practices of space-creation.

Physical Space

Carole Guyett’s practice involves a number of dedicated spaces in support of different elements of her work. A ‘clinic’ complex (including a dispensary full of remedies and a consulting room) offers space for her work together with patients; an indoor temple, herb garden and labyrinth (which she also considers as ‘temples’) constitute ceremonial spaces; and then she also works with the land such that “you could say the whole of the land is my workspace”. She considers “the quality of space” as fundamentally important; even her clinic space foregrounds a value of beauty as “part of honouring the plants as path and healing”. Intentionality is another key value informing the design of the spaces that she works within. For example, her dedicated ceremonial space embodies and reflects the relationships nurtured therein within its decor, spatial location and architecture:

An intentional space for anything is really important, if you're able to create that. In terms of specifically for working with the plants, the temple has the plant paintings [...] which really brings in the energies of the plants [...] and it's out in nature, so we can see nature through the windows [...] and the shape of it.

The shape is a decagon, which has significance as regards both the spiritual/theoretical frameworks underpinning Guyett’s work and the relationships of the land

⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

on which it is built:

That originated because the overlighting deva of this land is the Dog Rose, that has five petals, and I also work with the pentagram shape, which is a five-pointed star, so it's like two pentagrams or two Dog Roses, one on top of the other, which makes the ten points, so the ten sides.

This symbolic rearticulation of significance within the materiality of the physical space of the temple configures it as expressive of Guyett's intentions and of qualitative aspects of the wider space (the informing presence of Dog Rose), creating a bounded space of meaning by virtue of the arrangement of its walls.

Creating Space through Ritual

Ritual within herb work is a tool that facilitates crossings between different orders and aspects of being. The extent to which ritual figures within herbalists' practices varies amongst practitioners. A common practice involves asking plants' permission before picking, or offering thanks after doing so, sometimes in the form of a gift:

When I'm harvesting I like to try and ask - like try and get a sense of - whether it's okay to pick that particular plant at that particular time. [...] I feel like you have to be quite respectful of the plants. And obviously from a practical point of view you don't want to be making big changes to the ecology of an area or damaging the habitats. [...] And then sometimes, especially when I'm foraging, I'll leave something of myself behind [...] a bit of hair, or something like that.⁷

Small interactive gestures like these are quite common as a form of ritual that herbalists bring to their interactions with plants. As well as invoking ritual practices, plants can also support them, contributing their characteristics to the creation of a particularised space within practitioner or patient ritual. Elisabeth Brooke details the

⁷ Clare Holohan.

possible ritual uses of the plants that she describes, detailing specific qualities and attributes and the ways that they might support ritual space and practices. Oats, for example, are helpful “for young men's puberty or coming-of-age rituals, to make peace with their vulnerable nature, challenging bogus masculinity, calming terror, valuing and cherishing their sensitivity but grounding it in the physical world”.⁸ Brooke’s descriptions also illuminate another element of ritual that figures in plant work; the alignment of particular activities with temporally bounded spaces - particularly the events of the astrological calendar:

I generally pick my herbs on their planetary day the week before full moon and make my tinctures as near as possible to the full moon and leave them for a lunar month, pressing them out again as near as possible to the time of the full moon, because I feel this potentiates their properties.⁹

Again, in this we see the way that calendar-ritual is used to facilitate crossings between, in this case, the qualities of herbs expressed as remedies and those of the moon and its celestial movements.

There are a plethora of different herbalist practices of space-creation (many herbalists have their own favoured exercises and rituals for moments of connection with plants) that function to align intention and environment. The use of herbal smoke illustrates this interaction particularly well; its use within Europe has roots in the traditional purification and sanitation (the fumigation) of spaces and bodies (human and animal), which uses Nikki Darrell characterises as “practical applications in the sacred ordinary”.¹⁰ However, the aromatic plants used (Mugwort, Juniper, Vervain, for example) are also characterised by emotional and psychological affective qualities, and the contemporary understanding of ‘clearing’ or ‘cleansing’ space with the aid of their smoke incorporates this duality of environmental and

⁸ *Traditional WHM*, pp. 290-1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁰ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 82.

emotional/mental 'clearing' (emphasising too the literal and symbolic function of the air element as connective in this regard). Ritual serves the in-habitation of intentional enabling relational spaces, replacing unthinking habits and ways of being with intentional ones, bounding the influence of the world and the socially determined meanings that inhere within it. This boundarying in turn allows for the emergence of layers of being and meaning otherwise occluded or excluded from perception. Within herbalist-plant relationship building, the kinds of meaning and being that one seeks to create space for (the emergence and understanding of) is plant meaning and plant being. Quietening the 'chatter' (suspending the influence) of the human-constructed world that is our immediate milieu supports attunement to the meaningful flows of the world beyond the human.

The 'crossings' of the ritual spaces of plant encounters may extend further still, into spiritual or metaphysical realms. In her book, *Sacred Plant Initiations*, Carole Guyett considers the importance of entheogenic plants within traditional and Indigenous cultures in shaping knowledge and guiding practice, wherein plants are frequently regarded as powerful teachers, and relationships with them sought for purposes of guidance, vision, and instruction. Central to Guyett's work in her locale of East Clare, is the conviction that many non-psychoactive plants native to or naturalised within Ireland also possess entheogenic properties; the capacity to "generate the divine within". "Perhaps" she suggests, "when approached with honour and reverence, all plants can behave in this way".¹¹ 'Approach' is a subtle keyword in this

¹¹ Guyett, p. 65. This statement is the premise for Guyett's exploration of 'plant dieting' as a practice (ritual fasting with one herb), which forms the subject of her book. Her work is largely an effort to recover and reclaim a practice of spiritually grounded plantwork that accords with the (white European) cultural tradition and ecological biosphere within which she works - a quest that confronts the difficulties of the loss of European folk herbal knowledge and of learning without the supportive context of a living cultural framework. In response to some of these difficulties, her process centralises the effort to learn from local plants directly as teachers, in which efforts she also incorporates knowledge and practices from within a Dineh tradition (a part of her training); an example of the complex entanglements of WHM with other cultural - and especially Indigenous - traditions). She conceives of this quest within a spiritual and historical framework: "[t]he idea of dieting native plants had been with me for many years and once I was in Ireland I had a strong sense that the native plants were calling out to be dieted in a ceremonial way. One of the difficulties in tracing our own traditional European plant diets has been the loss of our oral tradition, a particular result of witch burnings in which so many shamans were wiped out or went underground. [...] Without a living teacher or guide, and only sketchy information about European plant diets, I was forced back on my own experience and the guidance from my helpers in Spirit. I did my best to listen to the plants to know what was being called for. With

sentence: within Guyett's personal and pedagogical practice, the ritual delineation of one's (physical, temporal or relational) working space, and of one's self within it, are foundational to any possibilities of emergence. Ceremony offers the structure for a delimitation of a space wherein "we can experience life in ways that are not normally accessible in everyday consciousness", where those more subtle properties of plants that would otherwise elude attention might have space to show themselves; "where mystery can manifest".¹² This space created is essentially a relationship between plant and human participants, co-created and collectively held. But for Guyett (and others), it also reflects and enacts a cosmology of ecological spirituality, and therefore such work is conceived as connecting the physical and spiritual realms. The encounter is determined by an ethics of relationship, emphasising qualities of gratitude, respect, equality and humility as "a way of honouring both the plants and the Spirit in all beings [...] of being in service".¹³ Within this conceptualisation, the relationship between the particular and the pan- (in this case named as 'Spirit') is conscientiously illuminated and amplified; a cultivation of the connections across 'micro' and 'macro' orders of being.

Theory of Space as 'Crossing'

Again, to reiterate, the difference is one of approach. "On the one hand" says Guyett, "you could say everything is sacred, but [...] when you define a space as sacred you're just empowering it, or you're honouring that sacredness even more so [...] it's just honouring all the aspects of life". To define a space as sacred pulls it

visiting shamans I took part in plant diets with non-native plants and these plants urged me to go deeper, to reconnect with an old way of working, and to bring it forward to the present day - *to wake up and remember*". Guyett, p. 12.

¹² Guyett, p. 67. Interestingly, Nathaniel Hughes formulates this idea in the other direction, "creating space in which your intention can define space, be manifest", which reversal illustrates again the reciprocal influence of individuated and collective or material space. However the idea of emergence remains the same: "[w]e allow the space for it. When you potentise the space you allow for it to happen. You could probably drink a cup of primrose tea in the café and nothing would happen".

¹³ Guyett, p. 68.

into relationship (which relationship is characterised by intention and 'honouring') in a way that reconfigures that space by virtue of the qualities of relationship. More than this, for Guyett, "it's creating a space that facilitates entry into the sacred [or] contact with the divine or the numinous", as "the sacred is everywhere, but we don't always recognise it". On this account, space is reconfigured/redefined as 'sacred' by virtue of the relationship (which relationship is defined by the approach - one of 'honouring'), which in turn reconfigures the relationship as one of connection and recognition, revealing the sacred that is already 'everywhere', such that the space becomes a point of entry or access to 'the divine or the numinous' within the ordinary that is usually obscured by virtue of our perceptive habits.

Carole Guyett's conceptions of her work and of the construction of space resonate with other frameworks of feminist-influenced nature-based spirituality. For example, the chapter in Starhawk's seminal classic of ecofeminist spirituality *The Spiral Dance* on the practicalities of creating a space as sacred (within her own Wiccan practice) offer illumination on many of Guyett's themes. For Starhawk, as well as for Guyett, sacred space carries a connective metaphysical aspect. Through ritual, practitioners "define a new space and a new time" existing "on the boundaries of ordinary space and time" and "between the worlds". To fully inhabit this liminal space necessitates a deliberate change in one's perceptive mode, suspending the frameworks of habitual thought and action to relax the "critical and analytical functions of the Talking Self" and create space for emotional, bodily and intuitive response.¹⁴ She stresses that to be able to enact this kind of deliberate change in perception is an acquired skill, conscientiously cultivated by the practitioner through dedicated persistent practice. This emphasis on practice and the development of particular perceptive capacities is well-reflected in herbalist pedagogies of direct plant interaction (most commonly on the level of enacting sensory perception)¹⁵ and her

¹⁴ Starhawk, pp. 71-2, 72.

¹⁵ See, for example, Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 11; Hedley and Shaw, p. xxxviii.

analysis articulates the way that control over one's own thoughts and habits can allow space for the emergence of perceptive capacities.

For some, this metaphysical casting (new worlds, defined by new modes of space and time) would be difficult to accept and such ideas might be easier accommodated metaphorically. However, when considered from the perspective of the social-constructedness of the material world - i.e. the ways that 'ordinary space and time', as experienced, are as much constructions of meaning as they are anything objective - the distinction (between the metaphysical and metaphorical, the extra-ordinary 'real' and the 'poetic') becomes less relevant. The point is to transgress the space of the ordinary and everyday that obscure from us othered (plant) realities. In this, poetic modes of practice, which illuminate the quality of constructedness, disrupting the boundaries of externally assigned meanings and reconfiguring the world along lines of meaning-in-relation, excel. Starhawk's own practices deepen this interaction of meaning and materiality through the use of ritual, in which the requisite "change in consciousness is acted out using a rich array of tools and symbols".¹⁶ The use of these 'tools and symbols' facilitates and creates connections between individuated and external realities:

Each gesture we make, each tool we use, each power we invoke, resonates through layers of meaning to awaken an aspect of ourselves. The outer forms are a cloak for inner visualisations.

This constant focused visualisation of connections between inner and outer correspondences "creates deep internal links, so that physical actions trigger inner states".¹⁷

The use of symbols and signifying tools, although typically less integral to herbalism

¹⁶ Starhawk, p. 72.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 75, 72, 75.

praxis, is also descriptive of the ways that some herbalists work to create and maintain supportive space.¹⁸ Participants within Carole Guyett's plant ceremonies, for example, are invited to contribute objects to an altar in the very centre of the space; "a focal point for energy and power". These objects may represent things (persons, intentions) that they would like to maintain as present throughout the process (to 'bring' to the bounded space of the ceremony) and in being placed upon the altar these items also become 'empowered' such that they come to embody the qualities of the ceremonial space, "gathering or receiving the energies that are very much active in that ceremony so that you can take that home with you". The re-presentative power of these objects then has an integral dimension of presence; their signifying power is deeply and richly qualitative. Thus connection is created between disparate times and spaces, the meanings and qualities of one context encapsulated within a signifying object that they may be accessed from another.

Similarly, a herbal labyrinth is conceived as a 'gateway', connecting self, earth and cosmos and the walking of its seven rings, each "planted with appropriate herbs and flowers" representing the seven energy centres of the body, "can be seen as a pilgrimage to the center of oneself".¹⁹ For Guyett this 'gateway' function of the symbolic operates by virtue of and through its significations:

The labyrinth is a symbol, or can be used as a symbol. Symbols are so much more than just symbols. [...] The physical labyrinth, which is a temple; it holds all these energies, and those energies can be expressed in the simple symbol of just drawing a labyrinth [...] In some respects, that would be carrying the energies of the labyrinth. Simply in the symbolic representation.

¹⁸ The terminology of 'holding space', used commonly within herbalism, is remarked by Nicola Kay Gale (within a context of homeopathy), which construction she observes to conflate tactility with intangibility - "something that cannot really be grasped". This observations speaks to a broader entanglement of the physical with the non-material within CAM conceptions and practices. Nicola Kay Gale, 'From Body-Talk to Body-Stories: Body Work in Complementary and Alternative Medicine', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 33:2 (2011), 237-51 (243).

¹⁹ Guyett, p. 47.

This qualitative affective power of even a simple drawing has to do with the way it is used; again, it is a matter of relationship and approach. When approached as something both meaningful and materially affective in this way - when used as a point of access to something else - the metaphorical and the material, or metaphysical, are collapsed. In Guyett's words, "it's like a crossover point between representation and actually a way into that very thing that it's representing". Starhawk's understanding of the operation of these symbolic tools as both connective and constructive of individuated and external aspects of reality resonates with the operation of poetic words, both re-presenting and remaking the world. It is this kind of intentional, creative invocation of the imag-inative and the symbolic in the service of re-making that allows Starhawk to claim her practice as poetic.²⁰ Engaging with signs and symbols in these ways enact powers of creative world-making within and through the existent (suspending habitual thought; drawing a circle within one's physical space); it is a form of working through the 'thought-language-habit nexus' from within. It is poetic in that it is a form of *poeisis* - a 'bringing to life' of the world by virtue of a creative relation: these symbols enact the kind of originary creative connective gestures of making sense that underlie language; its expressive, productive power. Symbols - archetypal abstractions - are reinvested with the force of the real; of that which they represent. They are charged with affective, connective and hermeneutic power.

Poetic Space

Again, practices of creating space characteristically enact 'crossings', drawing upon and emphasising connections between private, individuated (psychological or feeling) and collective, shared (material or worldly - or spiritual) 'spaces' such that

²⁰ On the symbol as "metaphysical connection between the visible and invisible" and its relation to poetry, see, too, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, retrans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 62-70 (p. 64).

action on one level may resonate on another. This process implies an acknowledgement of being as relational and world-embedded; the idea that our mode of being-towards others is always impacted by elements of our contexts that we carry into the interaction. To create space (conscientiously or ritually) is to attempt to exert control over this, drawing a boundary between the affects and influences of one's environment and one's output in thought and action. Another aspect of these connections is expressed in Nathaniel Hughes' understanding that "the fundamental purpose of ritual is to create a space where you can access realms that are not socially acceptable". He muses:

There's a real parallel there with the sanitation of the wild and control of our spaces with the control of our consciousness. There seems to be a real fear of that space where dreams and reality merge.

In these statements, the individuated and the shared worlds (of the practitioner/patient and the plants respectively) accessed through ritual plantwork function as spaces of excess, beyond the constraints and controls of social determination. The idea of the individual engaging with their own 'inner' individuated spaces - the psychological, the emotional, the sensory - as an access point for healing, and the idea of these spaces being boundaried by, and engagement with them occluded by, culturally informed habits, is characteristic of holistic approaches to healing, which conceive of the individual within a wider context of (to greater or lesser degrees mutual) influence.

Hughes elaborates on the above:

If you know go to a town centre and you've got a concreted-over world that we've created for our own convenience, it serves a purpose. It allows all sorts of things to happen within that space. But it doesn't allow the wild; it doesn't allow the wild ecosystem, or whatever the word 'wild' really means. It's not there; it's not built for that. So if we're wanting to nurture that space then there's a need to create the ritual space for the wild. To let it emerge in that

space more. And there's all sorts of people doing amazing things like that. An artist doing a beautiful bit of graffiti somewhere... people walk past it and something opens in them that connects them or reminds them of nature somewhere. For instance. I think that's a big part of the role of art, is to focus awareness and create a ritual space. At that moment you look at a painting and you're transported. It's drawn your attention and it's opened up something in you. We've got a beautiful painting of a bluebell wood done by a friend. And it acts as a gateway to map into all those experiences of bluebell woods that I know. So it's a bit like, in a way, many religions use icons as doorways to map into a state of consciousness. [...] That's a really beautiful thing that art can do, is anchor us; remind us, tap us back into it.

The possibilities of focus, delineation and transportation that art engenders for Hughes are reflected in the poetic as a methodology of heuristic, animating world-engagement. Art - like religious icons - can act as doorways, creating space amidst a socially constructed thought-world of concretised abstractions for the emergence of something else; something undetermined and excessive. It is this heuristic capacity of the symbol and of the poetic word that Starhawk recognises in conceiving of the witchcraft that she practices - based in an ecological "interconnectedness with all forms of life" - as a 'religion of poetry'. Within this religion, 'the Goddess' that it centres as deity is something like an ultra-metaphor; it functions as a doorway to the recognition of divinity as immanent within the everyday world, steering it's adherent's gaze to the self, and to each other, "because it is in each other that the Goddess is found".²¹

If regarded with suspicion by some herbalists, this sort of language and conceptualisation, with its spiritual overtones and associated metaphysical implications, divorced of any culturally established theoretical structure, is anathema to much of critical theory. In an essay attempting to bring together Starhawk's feminist thinking with that of Donna Haraway, Joan Haran finds the readiness to employ the symbolic and metaphorical tools of meaning-making as magical practice

²¹ Starhawk, pp. 209, 207, 209, 210.

“challenging” and difficult for the post-structuralist influenced strand of feminist critical thinking.²² In particular, her employment and advocacy of spells and charms within her practice, gives “the sense that [...] Starhawk has pushed her creative work with myth and metaphor and her instruction in technologies of the self beyond a credible limit”. Yet despite these scholarly qualms, Haran makes an attempt at rescue of the more theoretically incredible elements of Starhawk’s writing by invoking the leeway offered by her explicitly literary work: “if we recast (pun intended) spells as speculative fiction, perhaps the chasm is not so great”.²³ The implication is that such theoretically wayward spiritual leanings are perhaps admissible with a little poetic licence.

This strategy resonates with this project’s strategy of adopting a poetic framework with the hypothesis that it offers a familiar, feasible and appropriate (within a EuroWestern cultural context) framework of admission for ecologically connective ideas and practices otherwise frequently dismissed as unacademic or unscientific (or, in Haran’s words, ‘woo’). Within a context of dualistic thinking, ‘fiction’ means ‘unreal’. Within the context of the poetic, ‘fiction’ is an invitation to step into a relational world whose subjective reality (which subjectivity also has a shared dimension) is supported by one’s own input and engagement. When freed from the constrictive province of ‘the literary’ and embedded within the world (as in Starhawk’s use of spells), these poetic worldmaking practices constitute an effort to reshape the stuff of our own realities with meaning in intentional (rather than culturally inherited, unconscious) ways. To reiterate, this is a question of finding ways to alter one’s approach, supported by the licence of poetic practice, to allow otherwise excluded possibilities to emerge.

²² Joan Haran, ‘Bound in the Spiral Dance: Haraway, Starhawk, and Writing Lives in Feminist Community’, *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 34:3 (2019), 427–43.

²³ Haran, pp. 433, 433.

3.2 Creating Culture

Culture Creation Can Function as Space Creation

Having considered modes of herbalist space-creation on a personal level, we broaden our view now to look at the ways that space is constructed as supportive on a cultural level, beginning with a look at herbalism's historical cultural relationships and expressions. In characterising WHM as a 'traditional knowledge', Sue Evans identifies key congruent features: firstly, its knowledge has been "generated over an extended period of time, by the 'folk' rather than by experts, using observation, not experiments"; secondly, plant information has been often transmitted via narrative, and lastly an informing framework of vitalism (which ideology she notes as contentious within contemporary practice)²⁴ offers "an understanding that matter has a life force and that human life is not superior to other life forms".²⁵ Despite the enduring use of plant medicines as prevailing cultural practice, the ongoing (and often violent) historical exclusion of community-embedded 'empiric' herbalism from the sphere of sanctioned practice (and thus from medical knowledge and medical history) contributed to its construction as a 'folk' practice (just as it now feeds into contemporary herbalism's categorisation as an 'alternative' form of healing). Within this lineage, categorised as a separate 'tributary' of herbal knowledge²⁶ and practice²⁷ and largely an oral tradition, much knowledge was held within culturally upheld constructions of meaning (story, song, plant names, rhymes, rituals, beliefs, associations, for example). Often, it is by way of such cultural fragments - 'folklore' - that elements of plantwork practices of the

²⁴ For an analysis of a cultural shift within herbalism from a framework of vitalism to one of holism, see Nina Nissen, 'Perspectives on Holism in the Contemporary Practice of Western Herbal Medicine in the UK', *Journal of Herbal Medicine*, 1 (2011), (76-82).

²⁵ Evans, p. 2101. These characteristics draw on the work of Martha Johnson in defining the features of 'traditional knowledge' (Martha Johnson, *Lore: Capturing Traditional Environmental Knowledge* (Hay River, Canada: Dene Cultural Institute, 1992), cited in Evans pp. 2101-02).

²⁶ Niemeyer, 'Personalizing WHM', p. 21.

²⁷ Francia and Stobart, 'Fragmentation', p. 10.

past have survived, and this often by way of the efforts of folklorists who have sought to document them; for example, the Irish Folklore Commission's 1937 School's Project in Ireland in which schoolchildren were enlisted to gather knowledge from members of the older generations and, in England, the efforts of nineteenth century scholars in the interpretation of medieval texts.²⁸ It is fairly common in contemporary 'herbals' for entries to include a section on the folklore of a plant, a tradition revived by Maud Grieve's 1931 *A Modern Herbal*.²⁹ Despite the strong connection of folk traditions of plantwork with orality, a lot of what remains accessible to scholars and practitioners today does so because it was, at some point, written down. Even so, as Sue Evans notes, "[w]hile contemporary Western culture is not an oral culture, transmission of information about plants via narrative continues to occur"³⁰ and lineages of orally transmitted inherited folk plant knowledge can still be traced within some areas of contemporary practice.³¹

Of course, in the past, textualisation favoured the scholarly traditions of plantwork over the folk traditions that were associated with women healers of the lower classes. Literacy, obviously, was a prerequisite. It is likely that, where the practices of folk healers were recorded, this would have frequently come to us via educated male scribes; the compilers of herbariums and compendiums that drew information from their observations of folk practice.³² Some of the complexities of trying to connect with an originary female-held folk tradition through scholarly textual

²⁸ Van Arsdall, p. 51.

²⁹ Hilda Lylel, 'Introduction' to *A Modern Herbal: The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic Properties, Cultivation and Folklore of Herbs, Grasses, Fungi, Shrubs and Trees, with all their Modern Scientific Uses, Vol I*, by Mrs M. Grieve, ed. by Hilda Lylel (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), Ebook, p. 22.

³⁰ Evans, p. 2101.

³¹ Such lineages perhaps remain stronger in Ireland, where Rosari Kingston finds Irish folk medicine more broadly to be "in a vibrant position" and "still in its first life" (Rosari Kingston, 'Folk Medicine and Its Second Life', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 12:2 (2017), pp. 91-106 (p. 104). Carole Guyett also attributes some of her (multifaceted) education to "an English hedgewitch" whose herbalism traced an oral tradition (p. 41).

³² An example is Marcellus Empiricus' *De Medicamentis Liber* - a 4-5th Century work, which Wagner, De Gezelle and Komarnytsky name as the 'peak' of the seepage of 'Celtic magical formulas' into the Latin textbooks: "[i]n addition to relying on previous writers, Marcellus clearly stated that the bulk of his recipes came from the local population... most of his recipes contained 10-20 plant constituents, and magical formulas, charms, and incantations formed an intrinsic part of his therapeutic strategies" ('Provenance', p. 9).

sources (in this case, midwifery and childbirth charms through the *Lacnunga* - an Anglo-Saxon medical compendium) is remarked by medieval literatures scholar Lisa Weston:

The very presence of oral "texts" in a manuscript marks them as appropriated; so does the existence of women's texts in an otherwise male context. They are by no means pristine remains of a primary oral tradition, though we can only speculate about how they found their way into *Lacnunga*. Should we posit a female scribe as first source, or a double monastery as their first home? How many transcriptions have the charms seen? These questions remain unanswerable in the present state of our knowledge, which depends, of course, on the accessibility of written texts. We can, nevertheless, hear a woman's voice behind the words that the charm records.³³

For herbalists attempting to re-root a plantwork practice within a historical lineage, or for academics attempting to research into folk traditions of healing, texts such as these are frequently a main source of access to, but can only gesture towards, the knowledge held collectively within the practices and discourses - the lore, the rituals, the recipes - of these times.³⁴ That we should, for the most part, have the greatest access to those scholarly, male-affiliated strands of herbal practice that found themselves recorded within texts, is, of course, reflective of prevailing social, patriarchal class divisions.

Looking to the plantwork traditions of non-European cultures (historical and continuing) we can see that the cultivation of ethical and equitable relationships with plants is very commonly supported by culturally upheld constructions of

³³ L. M. C. Weston, 'Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms', *Modern Philology*, 92:3 (1995), 279-93 (282).

³⁴ Alongside Mary Chamberlain's aforementioned work on 'old wives' tales', Elisabeth Brooke's *Women Healers Through History* is one such attempt to excavate the buried lineage of women's healing practice, and offers some examples of female-authored medical texts of antiquity, mostly by virtue of reference; although her study does not seek to confine itself to 'folk' healing practices and many of those that she references were figures of some social standing. A preliminary reference to the poetry of Sappho, fragments of which had been discovered through archeological excavation of "an ancient garbage dump" of "papyrus mummy wrappings which had been used to stuff coffins and embalmed animals" within the context of historical patriarchal erasure, implies that the politically-serving figurative and literal burying of female-authored texts may have influenced our supposition of their existence. Brooke, *Women Healers*, p. vii.

meaning such as ritual and lore. An example is the 'plant teaching stories' told by herbalist Wendy Makoons Geniusz in her written offering of (her own inherited) Anishinaabe herbal knowledge and practices. These stories, integral to the transmission of plant knowledge, take different formats; there are the stories of the plants themselves (as "beings with their own histories, stories, beliefs, and ways of life"); the culturally established and honoured *aadizookan* (a "story that is cognisant it is being told"), and the personal stories, "gathered along with the plant", without which "no one will believe a medicine person" in their professed knowledge.³⁵ We can very well imagine that this crucial function of story and narrative to a culturally held and maintained system of herbal knowledge and practice was descriptive, historically, to Western European traditions too. Indeed, we find Geniusz's description of the importance of personal stories echoed in Ronan Foley's historical account of folk medicine more broadly in Ireland: "[j]ust as the therapeutic landscape of the spa or holy well relied on its sustained healing reputation, so the reputation of the folk practitioner also depended on word-of-mouth and, indeed, stories of effective cures associated with that practice".³⁶ By virtue of these stories (alongside other elements), plants (and even landscapes) - along with the practitioners who act as their intermediaries - maintained a cultural representation, and reputation. We can also imagine that this would serve, to some extent, as a system of verification appropriate to the subjectively rooted knowledge forms and the regard of the plants themselves as healing agents or cures, however fallible; trust would be gleaned through repetition or accumulation of stories or experiences.

Difficulties of access on account of the historical suppression, devaluation and destruction (and appropriation in the guise of professionalisation - or in its colonial

³⁵ Mary Siisip Geniusz, Wendy Makoons Geniusz, and Annmarie Fay Geniusz, *Plants Have so Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask: Anishinaabe Botanical Teachings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. xiv, 7, 3.

³⁶ Ronan Foley, 'Indigenous Narratives of Health: (Re)Placing Folk-Medicine within Irish Health Histories', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 36 (2015) <doi: 10.1007/s10912-014-9322-4> 5-18 (13).

forms) of folk plantwork traditions are, as already mentioned, a profound obstacle for contemporary herbalists working within a WHM tradition who seek to root their practice in the historical cultural context of their lands or heritage.³⁷ Within Britain, where the erasure of folk herbal practice was particularly successful, Elisabeth Brooke finds these problems further compounded by the cultural-psychological impact of these legacies of suppression, which cultural memory she surmises to underlie difficulties of reclamation of an indigenous heritage, with its association with inadmissible esotericisms. She writes:

I suspect the reason is a cultural memory we have in Britain of the consequences of practising the magical and esoteric, the witch panics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although England and Scotland did not kill “witches” on a scale comparable to other European countries, the fear of witchcraft became embedded in our psyche as the ultimate sanction for radicality. [...] As British herbalists we enjoy a freedom to practice unknown in most Western countries. I believe in response we have signed a Faustian pact to be “scientific” and reject half of our European Tradition so as to “not rock the boat” by using anything which smacks of witchery and revolution. Most British herbalists, including myself, trained in a tradition founded in Physiomedicalism, introduced from the USA in the nineteenth century. [...] This system has latterly fallen out of favour and science-based medicine has replaced it. This leaves the British practice adrift, without a philosophical framework. However, for many this is a preferable situation than embracing the English tradition and being seen as a “wizard”.³⁸

The killings that Brooke references represent another, more brutal, strand of the historical suppression and erasure of folk herbal knowledge. Whilst the witch trials concealed a plethora of broad systemic and extremely localised political

³⁷ Within Europe there seems to be frequent emphasis within herbalist narratives on rooting in the cultural traditions of the lands with(in) which one lives and works (i.e. the traditions associated with one’s geographical or bioregional context) whereas in North America, where the cultural traditions that are historically appropriate to the lands are those of Indigenous cultures and which have been suppressed and erased by white settler practices, the narrative emphasis is more frequently on rooting within one’s own cultural heritage than the cultural heritage of the land where one lives.

³⁸ Brooke, *Traditional WHM*, p. 21. It is perhaps worth noting that although for most of this paragraph Brooke references a ‘British tradition’, she narrows her focus to ‘the English tradition’ in the last line. Though perhaps reflective of an Anglo-centric bias, it maybe also reflects a nuance in her point regarding the differing situations of Scotland and Wales, where folk herbal traditions often feature as elements of proud heritage-reclamation within nationalist cultural frameworks. (Mary Beith also notes that the Scottish Highlands were “scarcely affected” by witchcraft persecutions (p. 13).)

motivations, the erasure of women's and working class healing knowledge (and thus also of their autonomy and politically and economically disruptive power) was a driving force (and certainly a consequence) and the association between herbalism and witchcraft persists.

Perhaps it is true that the rejection of this cultural framework is a continuing contributive factor in the incoherence of the tradition and its knowledge, but there are also likely many diverse reasons why English medical herbalists should not, by and large, choose to nourish the association between herbalism and 'witchery' and 'embrace the English tradition' in attempting to root their practice (including the "profession's fight for survival and recognition" described by Waddell).³⁹ Whatever position one wants to take, the value of being able to root one's practice in a cultural tradition that holds it would be recognisable for most. For those whose herbalism emphasises kinds of knowledge and practice that are excluded or denigrated by the broader social paradigm, the delineation of collective discourses, ideologies, languages, forms of practice in common, can offer a supportive space of cultural 'holding'.

Taking up Elisabeth Brooke's work, Elizabeth Caldwell finds another site of the legacy of disavowal in 'scientific boundary work' where a "widespread strategy for demarcating science from non-science is to compare rivals with religion or magic, as both are commonly considered to be a contrast to the rational logic of science". These strategies of delegitimation by virtue of association with magic that Caldwell finds as a self-consolidating tactic of contemporary science - the biomedical/positivist/rationalist marginalisation of herbalism as esoteric - are the same as those whose origins Brooke locates in the politics of the witch trial era. Interestingly, Brooke (considering the disappearance of medical astrology from mainstream

³⁹ Waddell, p. 5.

herbalist practice) notes the exemption of non-European traditions and their underpinning philosophies from any analytic criteria of legitimacy; esotericism is tolerated within other cultures “because they were ‘other’ and not expected to be rational”. She interprets these allowances within a framework of colonialist Orientalism, wherein othered belief systems and knowledges are simultaneously patronised and appropriated.⁴⁰

It is quite common for qualified WHM practitioners to train in diverse fields to be integrated into their practices as complementary; those that contribute energetic understandings of the body, for example (acupuncture; reiki), or alternative strategies of diagnostics, or techniques such as those shamanic practices whose lineages remain stronger within non-European traditions. The extent to which these trends are instances of Orientalism perhaps involves some nuance of analysis. We can acknowledge, too, in herbalism past and present, the occurrence of symbiotic forms of cultural exchange (as opposed to appropriation) and that motivations for and styles and depth of learning vary. At the same time, we can also recognise that, as Charis Boke notes, the availability of these knowledges to WHM for uptake and integration is on account of colonial histories and this kind of “lifting and enframing is at the heart of the many kinds of violence that colonialist acquisition of knowledges and practices does across the surface of the planet”.⁴¹ In any case, the observation that this strategy of holding multiple distinct strands of practice perhaps allows greater scope for the integration of excluded practices without threatening the public perception and establishment acceptance of WHM as a scientifically coherent professional medical field is an astute one (although, as noted, the boundaries of tolerance and acceptance seem to have shifted in recent years). However, where Orientalism and culturally appropriative practices persist in Western herbalism, perhaps a challenge to the hegemony of positivist paradigms - the taking

⁴⁰ *Traditional WHM*, p.17

⁴¹ Boke, pp. 157-9.

seriously of non-analytic epistemologies and expansion of the boundaries of permissible knowledge to accommodate other (including other than human) forms of knowing - could help facilitate a shift. That is, if accepted knowledge is not 'expected to be rational', the appeal of exempt 'othered' knowledges as a way of evading these constricted parameters is diminished. Or, more to the point of this thesis, perhaps the resolute persistence of intuitive, imaginative, directly experiential and ecological forms of practice within herbalism might help to expand these boundaries.

It is important not to mistake the scarcity of a coherent continued cultural heritage (for whatever reason) for an absence of cultural context; the logics, practices and values of Enlightenment thought, and the abstract ideological superstructures that underlie our social and political structures, as well as the cultural entrenchment of media and technology, all impact upon and manifest themselves within herbalist practice as much as any other sphere. This recognition is apparent in Nathaniel Hughes's reflection that "a lot of what we do with the school is we are decolonising our socialised self". He draws from critical race theory, and a recognition that "the starting point is that we are complicit" to reflect upon "the extent to which we perpetuate violence"; which colonial violence he perceives also echoed in our cultural relationship with the environment. This process of collective, conscious decolonisation could be conceived as another aspect of space-clearing; a way of consciously decreasing the practitioners' entanglement within and determination by their own cultural inheritance, and their complicity in its collective upkeep. The active acknowledgement and ownership (as a basis for deconstruction) of one's own complicity counters the mechanism of abstraction, inherent within EuroWestern ideological paradigms, which enables thought to assume a transcendent, universalist position. Also characteristic of our broad cultural paradigms is the operation of erasure by which a system's internal workings, and its histories, are obscured. Erasure functions through the narratives and identities of neutrality,

timelessness and naturalness that are facilitated by the adherence to logical frameworks of abstract reason, and which are inherent to the political operations of capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy. In erasing their own histories, these ideologies also work to erase “the historical sense of our common past”; a process Silvia Federici calls ‘the enclosure of knowledge’ (in reference to the historical enclosures - of land, “but also of social relations” - that enabled the development of capitalism).⁴²

Brooke’s identification of a cultural memory of suppression as an obstacle towards reclamation of an indigenous English plantwork heritage is a compelling thought, but if true, is given its force by the ongoing political functions of the positivism that is its wider context. That is, the self-erasure and self-obscuring - a pretension towards culturelessness disguised as objectivity, transparency and neutrality - that is at the heart of our inherited and internalised cultural paradigms. Again, folk herbalism, as a lineage (or as many local lineages) of shared knowledge and practice - what we can regard as a tradition - is recognisable as such predominantly in collectively upheld cultural constructions (lore, ritual, charms and recipes, local plant names). Its cultural situatedness also contributes a sense of identity, and the destruction of the cultural framework within which folk herbalism made sense and was transmitted (throughout Britain and Ireland but within England especially) has contributed towards an accordant loss of identity on these terms, such that Elisabeth Brooke finds the contemporary practice ‘adrift’ and lacking a cohesive theoretical (we might also read: cultural) framework. We might also see this in the vagueness of the (undefined) unifying term ‘Western Herbal Medicine’. Culture that recognises itself as such - and deliberate, intentional, conscientious culture creation

⁴² Silvia Federici’s work gives an account of the political mechanisms of capitalism’s establishment, and in particular the suppression of female bodies - the witch hunts being a primary example. She sees a legacy of the historical enclosures in today’s “enclosure of knowledge, that is, the increasing loss, among the new generations, of the historical sense of our common past.” She continues: “Saving this historical memory is crucial if we are to find an alternative to capitalism. For this possibility will depend on our capacity to hear the voices of those who have walked similar paths.” Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009) p. 10.

- can work to counter the mechanism of erasure at the heart of the EuroWestern paradigm as well as contributing a cohesion of identity. The self-defined discourses, ideologies and practices of radical herbalism in particular, whose ethical political commitments include an effort towards illuminating and interrogating the operation of the self-obscuring ideologies of our cultural milieu, enacts a conscientious and intentional form of culture creation as a practice of resistance.

In recap, the first half of this chapter looked at how the creation of intentional bounded spaces - material, mental or temporal - works to hold the practitioner within a supportive framework for plant interactions. We then broadened out the discussion to consider how cultural 'spaces' - of shared languages, ideologies, discourses, practices and orientations - can perform this same 'holding' function on a social level. The argument is that meanings can be inscribed and endure within these phenomena in the same way that they are in the material world, and that these collectively upheld spaces of meaning can offer a supportive contextual space for plant encounters; one that is ephemeral and immaterial but is also shared. As we just saw, within herbalism (historically, but even still today), the broader social context against which practitioners draw their boundaries has been, typically, broadly non-supportive and often actively oppressive, and herbalist knowledge and practices actively excluded from and delegitimated by the sanctioned institutions (e.g. biomedicine) and its narratives (e.g. medical history). Thus the inscription of knowledge into shared cultural frameworks has traditionally offered, and can continue to offer, a supportive bounded context for herbalist practice. It is a way in which plantworkers have created (and can create again) space within an often-hostile social paradigm.

The remainder of this chapter will first look to the ways that herbalism has historically situated itself in and expressed itself as culture to expand upon the idea that this kind of cultural 'holding' of knowledge is characteristic of traditional

herbalism and will explore some of the implications of the detachment of much contemporary herbal knowledge/practice from its cultural traditions. It will then consider the ways that, within this context of detachment, as well as within a broader cultural paradigm of positivist world-estrangement, the poetic resonance of herbalist plant practices with those of the past offers WHM form of re-rooting in its own cultural traditions. It will also look at other practical ways that certain strands of contemporary herbalism do work to create explicit supportive cultural frameworks and stories for their operation within, and in challenge, to a broader non-supportive culture. Following that, it will delve into a little theory to explore the mechanisms of culture creation as a form of worldmaking, both within the context of ecological/more-than-human forms of worldmaking, and as a form of poetic practice. Finally, in light of these understandings, having reconceived of 'culture' as something that is (like language) integrally ecologically grounded rather than exclusive to and definitive of 'the human', it will look at how herbalist practices of co-creating space together with plants can be conceived as a form of culture creation.

Upkeeping Cultural Tradition through Conscientious Practice

So, turning now to look at contemporary practices, having noted the relative absence of a coherent theoretical grounding or clear identity of Western Herbal Medicine, Guy Waddell suggests that "while other traditions that use herbal medicines have concepts as their central institutions, WHM has the material herbs themselves, even if this sometimes leads herbalists to look 'outside' for concepts that meet their needs".⁴³ This hypothesis suggests that, despite the profession's drive towards scientific grounding (which he identifies as having been necessary for its survival), at the heart of this contemporary herbalist practice is the tangible, corporal presence of the herbs themselves.⁴⁴ This idea rediscovers, hidden within

⁴³ Waddell, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Or more poetically "the 'vibrating' reality of herbs that has not been forgotten by herbalists" (Waddell, p. 83).

contemporary WHM, the world-embedded traditions of direct relationship with the herbs as living beings, as was characteristic of the excluded knowledge-forms of the 'empirics' of the past. If the knowledge forms themselves have been excluded, readmissible only within 'othered' forms from systems that are 'outside' of the regulatory bounds of EuroWestern cultural paradigms, the traditional grounding of folk herbalism within practical, world-rooted relationships with plants persists. I accord with the hypothesis of 'the herbs themselves' as central to WHM and offer the additional reflection that, if the tradition was upheld largely through practice, and contemporary practice characterised by the centrality of the plants themselves, perhaps it is these practices of working directly with the plants themselves, in ways that resonate with and reflect the practices of those that have gone before, that offers contemporary WHM opportunities of rooting within its own tradition. We've seen already how the heritage of traditional herbalism cannot be retrieved from within the written record (how 'history' is not adequate to herbalism's past), but constitutes rather a 'lived' tradition, located within embodied and embedded relationships between plants and people and place, which relationships and their contents were shared and collectivised on the level of the cultural. It is culture and tradition, rather than texts, that have functioned as the primary holding space for the knowledge that is their contents. A main way, then, that practitioners might connect with this heritage of relationships-in-practice is through the resonance of their own practices with those of the past.

The creation of opportunities for rooting in tradition is reflected in Clare Holohan's choice to work predominantly with plants that grow well in Scotland:

I prefer not to work with plants that I haven't properly had experience with or maybe grown [...] I mostly use plants that - are not necessarily native but - will grow in Scotland.

Although that partially reflects the practicalities of growing ("I don't have to put as much effort into growing Nettles as I do into growing Ashwaganda!"), it also carries

for her a feeling of connectivity with herbal practices of the past, as well as the land, and also the people that live on that land in the present day:

It does feel like you are carrying on a tradition and there's something quite nice about working with the plants that grow in a certain place for the people that live in a certain place as well.

For her, it is in these interactions with the plants themselves, within a context of ecological and human community, that a sense of tradition comes into play in her work:

I don't think I follow a particular tradition but I guess in working with the plants it feels like you're carrying on a tradition that is centuries old. But it's probably evolved. The way that I practice herbal medicine is probably really different to the way that it might have been practiced hundreds of years ago and what that might have looked like in the past is probably quite different to what it looks like now.

In the absence of actual knowledge of herbal practices of the past, a sense of the tradition occurs here as a feeling. The past is accessed through practice as a sensed resonance:

Sometimes it's like, say you're harvesting something, you kind of get a sense that you're doing something that people have been doing for hundreds of years. And so going out and gathering seaweed [...] you can think about how important that harvest was to people in the Highlands in days gone by and how it was literally survival food for them and so [...] that is a way of connecting to the tradition as well.

Holohan's practical relationships with the herbs as living plants offers a sense of connection and coherence to her work that roots her within the traditions of the lands and their ecologies (with which she is herself entangled) outwith any theoretical framework.

Cristina Cromer describes a similar sense of connection in her work of decocting

medicines (extracting herbs in simmering water), the specifics of which she developed independently, and which is an integral and distinctive element of her practice:

I suddenly realised that the heat pulsing - having it come up to steady heat and then go back down again - I thought 'this is how medicines would have been made!' You put the medicine on the hearth or on the hob, and then somebody needs to feed the fire or make some food or take out a firebrand to set fire somewhere else, and you would have taken it off the fire. It would have been on and off the fire all day long. So this pulsing of heat is normal for making medicine.

Cromer has developed a method of practice that has resonance with those of tradition, but it was many years before a recognition of these resonances became conscious for her. These echoes were always there, within her work, but a conscious recognition now allows her to feel a sense of connection with the traditions of the past. Perhaps she may share her insights and processes with others,⁴⁵ who may also then enact these same procedures of slow, attentive medicine making, removing the mixture from and returning it to the heat, and thus a cultural connection will be forged.

The Collective Nature of Thought and the Mechanisms of Culture-Creation

We have just looked at the ways that culture-creation can function to provide supportive contexts for herbalist practice (in a similar way to other kinds of herbalist space-creation), delimiting a common cultural space, which might help enable survival and growth within an otherwise disabling cultural context. These collectively upheld spaces can also serve to hold herbal knowledge, traditions and identity. We'll now take a few steps back to consider some of the mechanisms of

⁴⁵ Indeed she has plans to write a book on the subject.

the processes of culture creation and, in line with the research aim of exploring the implications of herbalist-plant relationships, understand the import and potential of the ways that herbalists create culture for an ecological way of being in the world. Culture creation, in the terms described above, is a product of the processes of worldmaking; a shaping of the world around us in a way that is accommodating of us, such that it recognises and reflects our being and our needs.⁴⁶ Because the world is already full of the inscribed meanings of others, this making is always a re-making. Which remaking of the world as we apprehend it to better reflect our own particular situation and experience is a constant process of thought. Thus the interaction of thought and world is cyclical and mutually responsive: if our thought makes the world (on a personal level; on the level of shared cultural worlds of meaning; on the level of our complicity in systemic or structural paradigms), then the world (in all of its cultural determination) also makes our thoughts. This is true in terms of the qualitative content of our thoughts, which is influenced by the inscribed meanings that we pick up consciously and unconsciously in our interactions with the world, but it is also true in terms of the very structure of thinking, as a process itself.

This processual structure of thought is broken down in detail by Eduardo Kohn in his anthropological work *How Forests Think*. In his laying out of a theoretical framework of analysis for the work, Kohn traces the lineage of the abstract symbolic thinking that is our cultural currency to its foundations in the habits of the living world. His analysis illuminates meticulously the mechanisms by which thought and materiality interact and interweave to create identities, ecologies, cultures and worlds, as manifest in the lives and habits of the Ávila Runa with whom he works and from whom he draws his insights.⁴⁷ Drawing, too, on the theories of C. S. Pierce, he

⁴⁶ More on this in Chapter 4.4: Imag-ining.

⁴⁷ Kohn's work offers an important theoretical exposition of 'thinking' as a function of living processes ('beyond the human') and I will draw on it considerably from this point. *How Forests Think* is a work of anthropology, whose informing context of study is a settled tribal community in the Amazonian Basin, and particularly their interactions with the forest world within which their lives are enacted and with which they are entangled. Kohn's analysis of these practices through a lens of semiotic theory offers insights into human relations with other living beings that are quite different to most of the approaches within the field of critical plant studies (in which I feel it underacknowledged as a study). It traces in detail, the path of development between

breaks down the way that thought itself is of the living earth - is made up of the tendencies towards self-organisation and representation that are characteristic of living processes - as encapsulated in his axiom that 'forests think':

Our thoughts are like the world because we are of the world. Thought (of any kind) is a highly convoluted habit that has emerged out of, and is continuous with, the tendency in the world toward habit taking.⁴⁸

The fact then, that this creative worldmaking is a collective, rather than just an individual, process reflects the relational nature of our existence in the world. Our thinking arises from our participation in an entangled ecological and social nexus, whose dynamic processes feed into our own habits of thought and action. Despite our cultural perception of thought as a thing sequestered inside individual human skulls, thought is, in fact, a social phenomenon that connects us integrally to the world and each other. In Kohn's words, it is "not just located in a single stable self" but is rather "constitutive of an emerging one distributed over multiple bodies", which is to say, "an 'us'".⁴⁹ Thus thought is illuminated as an ecologically structured and implicated process.⁵⁰

other-than-human thinking (the thinking of the dense ecology of the Amazonian forest) and human linguistic thinking. The deeply interwoven lives and practices of the Ávila Runa with whom Kohn works allow this connection to be visible; their culture inhabits (or allows them to inhabit) the liminal spaces conducive to ecological interaction. Kohn's work is based in a personal acquaintance with this community and their culture - a relationship cultivated over many years - and thus he is in a position to be able to draw upon their thinking and practices in his work with a respect informed by these relations. As a secondary take-up of some of these ideas, within a sphere of academic exchange far distantiated from these lives lived, my own writing does not hold these same possibilities of ethical consideration according to contextually-informed understanding. I note this indirect indebtedness within my work and the limitations of this form of dialogue.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.60.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵⁰ Kohn's efforts to delineate an anthropology 'beyond the human' offers a posthumanist expansion of world, thought, and language that is grounded in semiotic theory, exploring processes of representation and sign production/interpretation as ecologically enmeshed and characteristic of all life. This is a very different theoretical lineage and approach to that of the phenomenological tradition that also informs this work, however both contribute valuable tools and insights for the theorisation of ecologically appropriate plant relations as informed by herbalist practices and I find them to be complementary here in this regard. Kohn's analyses of the semiotic structure of life - and the thinking that living things do - offers a description of the mechanisms of those ecologically implicated relationships that a poetic approach seeks to enact. Discussions of a similar conception of the collective nature of thought within a phenomenologically informed context can be found in David Abram's and Luce Irigaray's discussions of air, in *Spell of the Sensuous* and *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (London: Athlone, 1999) respectively, and this conception also resonates with other living Indigenous concepts such as the Inuit understanding of *Sila* (Todd, "Ontology' is Just Another', p. 5).

The coincidence and overlap of our thinking - our collective efforts of worldmaking - allows us to ground and orient ourselves in a world-in-common. This is the reality that we can presume to share with those around us, that we recognise as 'our world'. It comprises an accumulation of coinciding, overlapping perceptions and interpretations, collectively upheld in thought, speech and action and inscribed into material forms, and it is the immersive inherited baseline from which we constantly participate in its making and remaking. Frequently, this collective participation in upholding and remaking the world around us constitutes a sort of social collusion to create an atmosphere, an epoch, a mode of being, or a culture.⁵¹ Commonly held cultural constructions function as social referents to uphold a world-in-common in which we can orient ourselves. This quality of sharedness of the world - that my perceptions and interpretations largely overlap with and can be mapped onto yours - is essential to our functioning well within it. Without this common picture, we are lost and alone in a world that likely does not reflect us. The phenomenon of culture shock references this mismatch wherein, finding ourselves immersed in a cultural environment in which the markers of collective perception and interpretation of the material have changed, we become disoriented. Kohn, too, recounts an anecdote in which the sighting of a bird in the forest rescues him from an extreme bout of dysphoria-induced abstract symbolic thinking (namely, the 'what-if' thinking of anxiety) to reground in a shared reality:

It resituated me in a larger world "beyond" the human. My mind could return to being part of a larger mind. My thoughts about the world could once again become part of the

⁵¹ For example, the way that different cities have different feels; the way that residents both take on aspects of that city and its life, and contribute to the collective creation of the character of a city, alongside other interactive contextual elements (the architecture, the weather, its historical cultural inheritance etc.). For the most part, these processes tend to be relatively organic and self-organising. Another example might be the ways that the days of the week differentiate themselves above and beyond their calendar structure; how, when you wake up, a day can feel like a Sunday, or a Monday. If we stop and think about it, we might be able to pinpoint aspects of why this is, but mostly the differences are apprehended on a subconscious, sensory perceptory level; the sounds around us such as the volume of traffic and the ways that it is driving, or of work in the street, or of movements of your household. We then tend to amplify these subtle perceived differences by reacting to them accordingly. Thus our own behaviours interact with social structures of meaning (like the working week) to participate in their maintenance as a shared reality.

thoughts of the world.⁵²

In this moment, his thoughts are pulled back from their inhabitation of isolating realms of symbolic detachment to the broader foundational ecological real - a baseline level of mind. This foundational ecological real, in which he is able to reground himself, reflects the interconnectivity of the living world; of mind and materiality. It is broader and vaster, without totalising. The sub-linguistic, sensual, infinitely deep and rich ecological real of the world 'beyond the human' grounds mind and meaning in its constitutive context.

Herbalist Culture Creation: Remaking the World as Supportive

The shared realities then that we inhabit - our 'worlds' - ground and orient us, determining our possibilities within them, and their boundaries may be more or less inclusive. One of herbalism's cultural contexts is that of 'Complementary Alternative Medicine', defined largely by its operation according to a holistic framework, by virtue of the categorisation of professionalised WHM practice under this umbrella. Its situation within this field roots it within a broad subcultural context that is already positioned in direct challenge to the dualism of EuroWestern thought paradigms. Which is to say that all herbalism - even the most professionalised and politically legitimated forms - shares something of an oppositional cultural placement, whether it likes it or not. This forcible positioning as 'alternative' (embraced by some) nonetheless offers a broad context of sense within a hostile wider cultural context for herbalist thought and practices, providing a platform for the sharing and the development of languages, ethics and practices in common, as well as divergence and debate. In his 1992 study of professionalisation in British herbalism, VanMarie proposed that medical herbalists were self-defined according to a 'culture

⁵² Kohn, p.49.

of practice' rather than a 'social identity', which culture of practice was based in "common modes of thought and action" including, in particular, "a culture of concern and caring for their patients" (as well as a left-leaning/green political philosophy). Moreover, this common cultural factor of patient-driven care he found to figure as a key determinant of clinical practice, over and above the formal knowledge acquired within institutional training. VanMarie's findings support the idea of culture as a more pertinent holding space for herbalist knowledge than contemporary formal knowledge systems and characterise professional herbalist identity as determined by a shared culture whose ideas and practices are in variance with those of the mainstream.⁵³

Radical herbalism in particular, as mentioned, exemplifies the possibilities of active, conscientious, context-creation within herbalism. The network and gatherings organised under this moniker have offered platforms for the convergence and mutual influence of different strands of politically and ethically concerned herbalism, working towards the development of a strong grassroots movement and self-conscious subculture. Characteristic of radical herbalism is the conscientious effort to dismantle the influence of harmful mainstream narratives and languages and to construct alternatives (for example around mental health, or the impact of patriarchy upon herbalist practices).⁵⁴ This is an effort, on the part of those that work within this cultural structure, to exert a control over the meta-narratives within which they exist and operate, and the meanings that they inscribe upon, and through which they interpret, the world. It is a rejection of, and attempt to dismantle, some of the harmful narratives of the biomedical model (and the cultural and logical frameworks in which it is rooted) and instead to forge new ones that are supportive to an autonomous, empowered, ecologically situated existence. These efforts are also typically marked by an active self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity acknowledges that

⁵³ VanMarie, pp. 139; 132; 128.

⁵⁴ As reflected in workshop offerings at the 2017 UK gathering.

subcultures can also uphold harm, such as the continued white herbalist erasure of other culturally rooted herbalisms and appropriation of their knowledge and practices (the decolonisation of herbalist culture is an ongoing emergent narrative in herbalism within Britain and Ireland).⁵⁵ Again, this is a form of creating context; a shared supportive and self-determined culture, within and in opposition to the broader inherited and in-habited 'culture-less' culture of capitalism (and other self-invisibilising superstructures). And this culture-creation is an effort to remake reality. A form of poetic worldmaking. And it is this concern with re-making reality (by virtue of exerting control, first of all, over its own thinking and practices within the bounds of a shared collectively upheld sub-culture) that constitutes it as a practice of resistance.

These efforts to re-make the world by virtue of bringing to light, dismantling and reforging the narratives through which it is subtly (often unknowingly) perceived and maintained, can also be described as a form 're-storying' (which word often carries connotations of restoration - both of the world with which we interact and of our caring, participatory interactions with it).⁵⁶ It acknowledges the interactivity of meaning and materiality obscured by our characteristic cultural estrangement, enacting a narrative picture of reality. This idea (that we can change the real by virtue of changing the story through which we encounter it) challenges the hegemonic universalism of our cultural paradigms (the 'objective Real') positing instead a more fluid and interactive ontology of perspectival multiplicity; there are many possible stories. This understanding is reflected in Nikki Darrell's statement that in order to 'decolonise our materia medica' and disentangle herbalist practice from the effects of a lineage of uprooted thinking, it is necessary to begin "listening to the stories of the many, rather than a select few".⁵⁷ By which she refers to plants

⁵⁵ Manchanda, 'Decolonial'.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Thom van Doreen and Deborah Bird Rose, 'Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds', *Environmental Humanities* 8:1 (2016): 77-94.

⁵⁷ Darrell, *Decolonising*.

as much as people, arguing for a deliberate re-grounding and entanglement within a localised ecology, where instead of relying upon imported herbs, we start “getting to know the locals” - Daisy rather than Arnica; Lovage where we might use (imported) Angelica - imploring us to “look around in your ecosystem [and] find out who’s growing around you and what medicine they have to offer”.⁵⁸ There is an artfulness here, in choosing which plants one works with, connects with and cultivates; which of the myriad herbs available within the materia medica one chooses to treat the person and the malady at hand. There is no one right way; no uniform one-size-fits-all standardised drugs. And similarly, there is an artfulness in the way that one constructs one’s world conceptually; the stories that one chooses.

Plants and Our Shared Realities

We have considered the ways that culture and world are implicated in one another, and the ways that thought is rooted in the ecological. And we’ve seen something of the ways that herbalists create supportive worlds (within the world) for themselves and their work through creating shared culture; and understood this to hold deeper implications as a form of remaking or restorying the world, dismantling some of the harmful meta-narratives and thought paradigms that structure our realities, and replacing them with conscious, supportive and enabling ones. Now, we’re going to bring the two strands of thought together, to consider how we can broaden out the idea of culture to include plants. How can we change our stories to recognise the ways that plants also remake their worlds and find where these respective worlds might coincide? How might we collude to create culture together with plants? Kohn’s anecdote of regrounding in a shared reality on sighting a bird (and the premise of his title contention that forests think) underline the ways that the collective reality that we share in common - an evolving entanglement of materiality

⁵⁸ Darrell, *Decolonising*.

and meaning, driven by encounters between experiencing, representing, perceiving beings - is not constricted to humans. The animals of the forest, as much as himself, he claims, "are semiotic creatures through and through. They are the results of representation. They are the outcomes of an evolutionary process of ever-increasing alignment with those proliferating webs of habits that constitute tropical life. [...] By acquiring a feel for some of these habits, as I did with that tanager [the forest bird] on the river's edge that morning, I can potentially become aligned with a broader 'us' thanks to the way others can share this experience with me".⁵⁹ The axiomatic insight of Kohn's work, that forests, and other non-human entities *think*, as exemplified in Ávila cultural life, dissolves the culture-nature binary as a boundary of human exceptionalism. Forests think too; plants and animals think too; and, more than this, the kind of thinking that they do grounds and enables the kinds of abstract, emergent, linguistic thinking that we culturally constituted humans do. In fact, despite the tendencies within our linguistically structured thought towards abstraction, and with it a detachment from the present, sensual, worldly existent, this broader, grounding ecological thinking is still there at the heart of our own.

Although we are used to thinking of (human) 'culture' in binaric opposition to (non-human) 'nature', our reality is already shared with many other living things, and we can broaden our participation in this shared real by becoming more attuned to its habits. Particularly, we can learn to notice and perceive the markers of communication by which other beings communicate with one another; this is at the root of listening to plants. Broadening our shared reality to include sharing with plants, and our world to include that which we share with plants, we open up the possibility that plants, too, can become collaborators in culture-creation. Rather than defining culture by virtue of ideologies of human exceptionalism, binarically opposed to 'nature', we could work towards creating a culture that is informed by

⁵⁹ Kohn, p.62. Despite what the title may suggest, Kohn's work retains some zoocentric biases in the kinds of other than human worlds that he considers.

and inclusive of plants; their lives and their meanings. Elements of this kind of sharing can be found within folk plantwork traditions historically. Many of the more general cultural aspects of folk plantwork traditions (and those of agrarian communities) pertain to a shared real whose participatory reach extended to the inclusion of both plant and human lives and concerns. For example, the rhythmical patternings of solar, lunar, seasonal and astrological cycles offered frameworks of interpretation and understanding for the lives and habits of plants and markers for the progression of time. The profound significance of these factors is attested to in the amount of folklore concerning them (across localities and cultures). Lore pertaining to weather patterns is another instance. These things are elements of a world commonly inhabited by both plants and people; they are features of a shared real that is very broadly defined. By being deeply attuned to and inhabiting these features of the world, plantworkers would have been also tuning in to the temporalities, concerns and habits of plants. Through the cultural upkeeping of their representation through ritual, lore, and other shared practices, a shared milieu of meaning is constructed whose reach includes the plants so important to those communities as well as their human members. Moreover, some elements of those cultural constructions that shaped the world as people inhabited it designated shared realities of plant-human inter-relation. The period of harvest for example, the beginning and end of which were traditionally marked by festivals, wherein the growth period of the plant would come to an end as crops were harvested for winter storage; photosynthesis might stop, seeds might be dislodged and scattered, energy might be redirected to the roots. The recovery and revitalisation of these cultural markers (such as the eight 'fire festivals' of the year of which those that mark the start and end of harvest are two) is frequently a feature of contemporary herbalist practices; many herbalists integrate elements of these traditional systems in their work as a way of connecting with both the lives, concerns and temporalities of plants and also to a cultural heritage of folk plantwork

traditions, and knowledge.⁶⁰ Typically, this is a cultural framework that embodies resistance to the totalising logics of the ingrained rationalism of EuroWestern culture.

Co-Creating Culture Together With Plants

Working together with plants in this way to construct localised worlds of shared meaning, grounded in shared realities, transgresses the nature-culture binary. Culture and the world are implicated in one another, and thought is implicated within the ecological. Choosing to listen to, and work with, the stories of the plants with whom we share our worlds dissolves the boundary; people collude to create culture together with plants. It is a way of working that decentres the human (as an anthropocentric structuring of reality), whilst maintaining a positioning within it (as a participant in an interaction). It involves re-implicating oneself, actively, within the ecological. Intentionally grounding in the shared real. It begins with a 'getting to know' plants in and as themselves (outwith their anthropocentrically socially-determined identities):

By growing the plants yourself, nurturing them and getting to know their needs, you enter into a deeper relationship with them. You get to be able to recognise them from infancy to maturity. The same is true for wild plants; if you start to learn to identify them from the emerging seedling, through all their stages of development, you come to have a deeper understanding of your allies.⁶¹

The term 'allies' is used frequently in herbalist discourse and captures something of this collaborative working relationship; a resonance and a connection across difference towards common ends. The 'getting to know', indicates a gesture towards understanding plants on their terms, recognising and being able to

⁶⁰ See, for example, Kingston, *Hidden Medicine*, pp. 236-336.

⁶¹ Darrell, *Conversations*, pp. 39-40.

respond to the agendas and desires that the plants bring to the relationship (“their needs”), which effort involves practical, direct, embedded interactions with them (growing them; nurturing them). Through actively engaging with the plants on the level of their own lives and realities (physical growth and development), deeper intellectual understanding is manifested.

This active making space within our thought and understanding for the informative influence of the material - the growth needs and habits of the plants with whom we share our space - reflects the ways that thought is always already shaped by the material. Elsewhere Nikki Darrell traces current paradigms of relation through a history of (amongst other things) the enclosure of land; urbanisation and industrialisation, deforestation, colonialism and overharvesting.⁶² If our cultural paradigms of thought and knowledge are already shaped by the organisation of the physical world in this way, then learning the habits of Vervain for example - how and where it likes to grow - and adjusting our own behaviours accordingly, means that in actively in-habiting a shared reality, we create shared understanding and shared culture together. Thus creating shared culture looks a lot like creating ecological community; becoming fluent in the material languages of plants, and allowing them a role in shaping shared realities. “One role of humans in the ecosystem” says Darrell “is in their service as gardeners”.⁶³ The garden is a space where human and plant intentionality coincide: in conflict or in collaboration. When gardening is conceived as a form of service, an attentive space of thoughtful consideration is created for the apprehension of plant needs and desires:

It is good to bring our feeling and listening, our sensing skills to this place, to make it a conversation and become experiential and engaged on the journey with the plants. We can work by feeling into the seeds, learning the song of the seeds, feeling what they need, feeding our information to them by sucking seeds, working with our bare hands and feet and

⁶² Darrell, *Decolonising*.

⁶³ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 33.

composting our waste to return to the soil. We can work with the plants when we are taking cuttings by feeling in to the plant, similarly with weeding and planting out. And when we are harvesting, we can ask permission, give gratitude and see what the plant and ecosystem wish to share with us, whilst making sure that as we harvest we are caretaking rather than pillaging.⁶⁴

In this way, the work of gardening is, for Nikki Darrell, a form of 'co-creation'.

For Darrell, this co-creative relationship with plants involves a willingness to slow down, "getting a sense, taking time to listen to them" rather than "imposing your ideas on to a place". This is not a reticence to take action, but an effort to understand, take account of, and work with the intentions of the plants, which listening and understanding also involves the "learning of what the plants prefer as regards their environment" as well as "meditating or dreaming with them" to "get a sense of what's okay and what's not okay to do". The kinds of listening that Darrell does - learning, observing, understanding, sensing and 'feeling into' - are an effort towards situating her thinking within the shared real such that her thoughts are 'of the world', her mind within the 'larger mind' of the garden ecology. In her understanding that there are "some plants that will grow happily here and some plants that won't [...] some plants that will want to be down in the water meadow and [...] some plants that love it up [on the] shale-y sort of Mediterranean slope", she puts her thought on the level of the "attention to the place and context of growth" that Michael Marder understands to characterise "a rooted mode of being and thinking" (i.e. 'plant thinking').⁶⁵

Nikki Darrell's thoughtful, feeling accommodation of plant intentionalities, understanding how her own world overlaps with multiple constructed plant-worlds

⁶⁴ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Michael Marder, 'Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence', *Plant Signaling & Behavior*, 7:11 (2012), 1365–72 (1368).

within this same shared space, is an instance of cross-kingdom communicative interaction, as respective plant and human intentionalities are negotiated and rearticulated in the making of the space as a garden.⁶⁶ The garden, as a meaningful space, is a collectively constructed world of interactive intentions articulated in spatial configurations of access to light and shade, overgrowth and pruning, preferences and maintenance of soil composition; a reality reshaped as hospitable and expressive of the diverse needs and desires of the plants and the humans (and other living beings) that co-inhabit it. If thought is understood to be ecological at base, then this kind of collaborative upholding and remaking of a world-in-common of coinciding 'social referents', wherein respective worlds are oriented towards a co-created mutual world, is a form of culture-making. This kind of ecological community-creation in conversation with plants is a form of culture-creation across boundaries of species difference.

Summary

Herbalist practices of reconstructing space as conducive to plant encounters can be recognised as an effort to disrupt the boundaries of the anthropocentric, culturally determined worlds of the everyday, demarcating a space that is simultaneously 'within' these and also opens beyond them and making room for the emergence within the ordinary of that which is habitually excluded (plant realities, plant expressiveness, plant knowing). Emphasis is placed upon the quality of space; possibilities of stillness, slowness, presence and focus, for example, are considered important for aligning with plant ways of being. In keeping with herbalism's holistic framework of understanding (and the characteristically multiple operation of herbs themselves) the spaces of plant encounters are understood to enact crossing and

⁶⁶ Again, see Marder, 'Intentionality', for a discussion of the phenomenological concept of intentionality in plant being and thinking.

connection between different levels or domains of being. This connectedness means that action on one plane can manifest on another (for example, the 'headspace' that one is in when harvesting plants may carry through into the medicine itself and into the way that it re-expresses itself within the plant-as-medicine/patient encounter), which understanding informs an emphasis upon the manner of approach. Changes in the way that one acts within or inhabits a space can facilitate changes in perception that can in turn facilitate the emergence of habitually excluded qualities; that which Guyett conceives as the sacred within the ordinary. Ritual and symbol both offer support as tools by which one's mode of perception might be altered, connections created and emergence enabled. Hughes' identification of art as capable of fulfilling a similar function, as a 'doorway' to 'map into a state of consciousness', describes too the operations of the poetic as facilitating connection to that which exceeds the socially constructed and the functional (exceeds language as it is circumscribed by linguistic convention and thought as it is circumscribed by concepts and accrued knowledge). A poetic framework of understanding enables an admission of knowledge, ideas and practices excluded by our habitual ways of thinking - that which Hughes identifies with the 'wild' - at the same time reconceiving of the poetic as a tool of creative worldmaking that can counter the cultural estrangement that the inhabitation of a world of concretised, invisibilised, externally-determined meanings engenders.

The configuration of space as supportive also happens on a cultural level, where collective constructions of meaning - narratives and discourses, ideologies, common practices - delimit a world of shared reference. These immaterial, collectively upheld cultural constructions have traditionally functioned as holding spaces for herbalist knowledge (the lore, the stories, the ritual of the oral tradition of community-embedded herbalism). The erasure and loss of these cultural spaces and detachment of contemporary herbalism from its traditional cultural lineage exacerbates the constrictions placed upon knowledge and knowing (acceptable

knowledge is rational rather than relational), which narrow strictures compound sometimes problematic tendencies to turn to the practices and knowledges of other cultures wherein the boundaries are set more broadly. To re-enlist the poetic (in the manner that Haran intimates as regards Starhawk's work) allows for an expansion of the boundaries of admissible knowledge, offering a framework for plant encounters that is appropriate to EuroWestern culture. 'Clearing space' on a cultural level involves an effort at deconstruction of the narratives that we inhabit, which process includes necessary efforts of decolonisation. The intentional culture creation of radical herbalism, in which conscious and creative control over the narratives within which herbalism operates is sought, aims to create a space within the broader cultural context that facilitates its transgression and disruption.

The idea that it is the herbs themselves (rather than any theoretical framework) that are at the heart of and define the practices of Western herbal medicine carries the implication that praxis and the cultivation of plant relationships can offer contemporary Western European herbalism a mode of re-rooting in that tradition and culture proper to it from which it has become estranged. Which connection is typically emplaced, as herbalists cultivate relationship with those plants that grow well locally, sharing with and through them a connection to the land. Which emplaced relational knowledges reflect the kinds of knowing that plants themselves have. More than this, cultivating relationships of conviviality and collaboration with plants - for example through gardening, wherein space is remade according to negotiated plant and human intentions - can be conceived as a form of interspecies culture creation. Taking up Kohn's Runa-inspired elaboration of thought as something that is (not particular to the human but) fundamentally of the world, herbalist working in collaboration with plants in these ways can be understood as an effort to reground thought and knowledge - and creativity and worldmaking - in the more than human 'shared real', constructing localised worlds in common. This is a form of deanthropocentric culture creation, where herbalists work together with

plants to create collective worlds of shared meaning.

Chapter Four: Attention and Approach

Introduction

We've just explored some of the ways that the setting up of bounded contexts function to support plantworker practices of learning from and with plants, and the ways that this context-creation enacts poetic modes of production, remaking space in a way that imbues it with meaning and intention. Now we turn to look at the encounters that these supportive contexts enable, emphasising practices that facilitate mutually participative exchanges with plants. This next chapter is concerned with ways of coming to plant encounters with an active focused directional attention. In particular, I shall consider the function and operations of curiosity, defamiliarisation, attunement and imagining as enacted within herbalist practices. These are ways of being-towards plants that counter ingrained cultural plant obliviousness and which facilitate faculties of perception. They are all conceived as forms of being-towards that elicit and enact our own constitutive being-with plants, helping to locate us in the living fabric of interactions and relationships that makes up the ecological infrastructure of life.

4.1 Curiosity

Herbalist Questionings

When I asked Cristina Cromer what she felt were the things most fundamental to her work as a herbalist, she answered "my open heart, my curiosity and my

compassion”.¹ Each of these describes a way of being towards the world and towards others that is relational, wherein the boundaries of the self are made porous to the influence of the other (that is, the plants and the patients with whom she works). Of these, she describes curiosity as “the trowel that keeps you going”:

If you're not curious you're not going to ask the next question. And the next question might be the one that unlocks the puzzle. But that has to go hand in hand with the ability to be quiet.

Curiosity creates space for emergence; the external orientation of inquisitiveness is matched with a measured reticence that makes room for the responses of the other. Nikki Darrell also values curiosity (which she sees as a culturally truncated phenomenon) as “something that really can open doors for people”, facilitating a productive querying of “what you’re told”. Her pedagogical practice accordingly emphasises the cultivation of curiosity as a tool of learning:

Part of the deschooling process is [...] you're going to be encouraged to go out and investigate and ask questions. And I think that's so important.

Curiosity as a mode of approach accords with personal, direct, world-entangled forms of coming to know; the sort of “primarily empirical and intensely practical” experimental methods that are historically associated with strands of traditional folk practice and were outlawed by the Church.² Asking questions can yield types of knowledge that transgress and can disrupt the authority of taught or inherited forms:

When people's curiosity comes into play they get answers outside the very strict parameters. So the whole exploration of 'is that a food or a medicine?' Why do we separate out food and medicine? [...] Why does everybody extract plants in alcohol these days? We didn't for a long time and why can't we just make Plantain leaf pesto and let's see what happens if we

¹ By which she references the heart as an organ of perception, aligning open-heartedness with trust and truth in her relationship with both plants and patients and in an ability to hear “the story behind the words”.

² Chamberlain, p. 48.

do that?! All the kinds of questions that little kids ask are often the ones that will yield some very interesting results and answers.

Curiosity then, is a mode of being-towards - open and inquisitive - that facilitates the productive disruption of that which might otherwise foreclose the encounter. That the most helpful kinds of questions are the ones 'that little kids ask' indicates that curiosity involves a decentring of authoritative knowledge to make space for not-yet-knowing. In this way, it clears space within the movement of approach for new understanding.³ This position of not-yet-knowing is also one of humility. Cromer notes the importance that the confidence of her (university) training brings to her practice and yet she doesn't allow this to foreclose the ongoing deepening of her relationships with the plants that she works with:

There's always more to learn and one of the great things about the plants is, of course, they necessarily keep us humble. [...] I don't know of a good herbalist who isn't humbled by the plants. I mean it's just shattering isn't? I'm looking at the plants in my window right now and I'm just... I mean it's overwhelming what they do! In stillness. I'm just blown away by it.

Curiosity is a means by which herbalist relationships of learning with plants is cultivated.

This decentring of the authoritative knowing self in asking questions is also characteristic of CAM practices more broadly, as a primary diagnostic tool in which the practitioner occupies the role of curious listener, eliciting a profile of the patients' complaints and the various (physical, social, psychological, emotional)

³ It is worth noting that the conception of curiosity in these terms, as something that clears a space within the movement of the thoughtful encounter, resisting foreclosure, contrasts with the classic Heideggerian use of the term (to designate a fallen mode of world-engagement in which one is transfixed by the novel and preoccupied with explanations in evasion of the inexplicable nature of Being itself), finding more affinity with the authentic, dis-closing mode of world engagement that he names 'wonder'. However, it might also be noted that, within the context of herbalist-plant encounters, that which curiosity (or 'wonder') opens space for also has integral ontic dimensions too; it is not just the inassimilable mystery of plant being that emerges, but the vibrant particularity of plant characters and plant personalities - plants as peculiar wondrous beings - which, as we'll see later, accords with their very functional identity as medicines. Herbalist curiosity then, as a form of space-clearing that facilitates emergence, can be conceived as a way of 'letting beings be'; but this letting them be also frequently involves an active taking up, transforming, putting into practical use. Thus the harvesting of Plantain and transforming it into pesto, as a way of eliciting its essence and particularity as Plantain, might be just as much a 'letting be' as sitting and meditating with it.

elements of their life experiences with which they may be connected. This is one element of the CAM practice of “constructing body stories” (another is embodied interaction e.g. touch) as described by Nicola Kay Gale, which term describes the inter-relational engagement between therapist and patient with a view to constructing a narrative picture of the patient’s issues within the context of their lives and which involves to a large degree “listening to body-talk”.⁴ Although the practitioner is active in asking questions, it is a questioning that elicits, giving space and voice to that which is otherwise typically silenced and this is its purpose:

In the context of the cultural dominance of the biomedical model which often ‘silences’ the ‘voice of the lifeworld’ (Mishler 1990), it is particularly important for student CAM practitioners to learn skills that enable them to ‘produce a patient that talks’.⁵

The skill of the practitioner in asking questions involves de-centring themselves to some degree in a manner that contrasts with the biomedical doctor-centred process of ‘diagnosis’, whose goal is “to arrive at a singular disease label” and which (unlike the construction of body-stories) “has no intrinsic role in healing”. The skill is to ‘produce a patient that talks’, but, crucially, it is an embodied patient that is centred. Whilst the practitioner may have developed a professional attunement to the signifying markers of ‘body-talk’, the patient’s verbalisation of their own experience is a fundamental form of access to the ‘lifeworld’ of the body. Bodies are centred and given voice to as knowledgeable and language is put in the service of this, which way of interacting challenges the Cartesian mind over body primacy of the biomedical model;⁶ and (we might add to Gale’s analysis) the logics of human exceptionalism and of EuroWestern culture more broadly. In their being curious towards, asking questions of and listening to living plants, we might find in the work of herbalists a parallel process, constructing plant stories and ‘producing a world that talks’. Which ‘production’ is, of course, *poiesis*: an artistic eliciting, or a

⁴ Gale, p. 237.

⁵ Ibid., p. 248.

⁶ Ibid., p. 249.

collaborative co-creative rearticulation, in which the particular being of the plant is illuminated.

Curiosity as an Element of Poetic Encounters

Curiosity as an element of poetic encounters corresponds with the appeal of the literary poetic, phenomenologically conceived.⁷ “Curiously indeterminate”, the text solicits an attentive engagement, offering itself as something to be questioned, interpreted, and made sense of: “through the intellectual universality of language it presents something that remains open to all kinds of imaginative elaboration”.⁸ This quality of appeal is characteristic of the relative teleological freedom of works of art more broadly, however, poetry, in particular, as a subset of ‘art’ and type of literary writing, encapsulates this call for creative participation, amplifying the appeal for sense-making that is inherent in any language.⁹ Concise and codified, poems present themselves to us as something open and interactive - their meaning determinedly unfixed - and thus eternally demanding of our interrogation.¹⁰ They amplify and make visible the participatory process of perceptive interpretation and bringing-to-life that is already an element of our engagement with language (the “poetic productivity of expressive speech” that Abram finds “at the heart of any language”), but typically obscured by its familiar, habitual functionality. And again, more than this, their appeal for engagement occurs not only on the level of sense but also of sensuality, materiality as well as meaning; we feel poetic words in our mouths and in our minds - their sound, shape and form.¹¹ Poetic words solicit our

⁷ Again, in returning to the poetic, I note that my use of the term ‘curiosity’ in this way departs from the Heideggarian usage of it, however the idea of an engaged attentive responding attentively to the appeals of the poetic is consistent with his thought and that of other phenomenological work on the poetic.

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth*, p. 137. See, too, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1980).

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Artwork in Word and Image’ in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings* ed. by Richard E. Palmer (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 192-224 (pp. 202-3).

¹⁰ Gadamer, ‘Eminent’, p. 6.

¹¹ Dufrenne, ‘Phenomenological’, p. 16.

collaborative, creative curiosity through thought and feeling at the same time, and in doing so, call language back to a state of worldly sensuality.

Asking Questions

The practice of asking questions exemplifies and manifests curiosity as an element of approach, engendering relationship and heuristic discovery. The use of a framework of guiding questions within the context of plant encounters is a common tool within herbalist pedagogy. For example, Carole Guyett's 'Exercise to Connect with the Spirit of a Living Plant' includes questions that serve to elicit an attentiveness to the manifold ways that the plant might express something of itself ("can you sense the energy around the plant?"; "what is its community?"; "what is its aroma and what does it invoke?"; "are its leaves rustling in the breeze or do its seedpods rattle?"; "have your feelings changed since being with the plant?").¹² The act of asking questions can engender a state of receptive curiosity. It can help in the noticing of differences between things and seeing things as new and of interest. It can move the questioner (sometimes from a state of distraction or passivity) into a state of alert interactive inquisitiveness (an often humbling position, as we tend to ask questions to which we do not, at the moment of asking, know the answers). To enact an approach of conscious and attentive questioning can also function to disrupt tendencies of speaking for or speaking over. Where language is put in the service of inquiry as we speak from a position of professed unknowing it opens itself up more easily to interaction and affect. To occupy this position disrupts the reification of knowledge, as the process of questioning holds the encounter open to the new; to being affected by, surprised and inspired. Thus curiosity, as manifested in the practice of asking questions, can serve a focused attention and thoughtful revealing, link us to the world around us through wonder and imagination,

¹² Guyett, pp. 77-9.

engendering an intimacy and openness that is conducive to learning with and from plants.

Curiosity as an Element of Plant Knowledge

The fundamental role of curiosity in engaging with plants (and its affinity with a poetic approach), is illuminated by Robin Wall Kimmerer, an American environmental biologist of Potawatomi heritage, who tells the story of her transition from the colourful plant-filled world of her childhood to that of a college botany major. She recalls her first encounter, at the interview for her freshman year, with the anti-poetic rigour of the academic sciences:

Even before I arrived at school, I had all of my answers prepared for the freshman intake interview. I wanted to make a good first impression. There were hardly any women at the forestry school in those days and certainly none who looked like me. The adviser peered at me over his glasses and said, "So, why do you want to major in botany?" His pencil was poised over the registrar's form.

How could I answer, how could I tell him that I was born a botanist, that I had shoeboxes of seeds and piles of pressed leaves under my bed, that I'd stop my bike along the road to identify a new species, that plants colored my dreams, that the plants had chosen me? So I told him the truth. I was proud of my well-planned answer, its freshman sophistication apparent to anyone, the way it showed that I already knew some plants and their habitats, that I had thought deeply about their nature and was clearly well prepared for college work. I told him that I chose botany because I wanted to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. I'm sure I was smiling then, in my red plaid shirt.

But he was not. He laid down his pencil as if there was no need to record what I had said. "Miss Wall," he said, fixing me with a disappointed smile, "I must tell you that that is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves." But he promised to put me right. "I'll enroll you in General Botany so you can learn what it is." And

so it began.¹³

Before she is shot down by the professor and the process of 'being put right' begins, Wall Kimmerer's plant knowledge is informed by (among other things) direct relationships with the plants that she encounters; relationships of which she is proud and which inform her sense of identity. She conceives of the plants as 'having chosen her'; a new species on the roadside is sufficient to have her dismount her bike; plants colour her dreams, and her questions are shaped by her perception of the beauty with which they strike her. Kimmerer's account emphasises a mutuality within the entanglements; much as artworks solicit our engagement through their aesthetic, sensual appeal, so do the plants solicit her curiosity with their beauty.

This is also an account of the privileging, within the EuroWestern knowledge paradigms of her ensuing academic career, of positivist forms of knowledge acquisition, which model is contrasted with the excess and frivolity that marks the accommodation of subjective aspects of experience (beauty) by the arts. Her professor's dismissal of her engagements with plants as "not science" and admonition that "if you want to study beauty, you should go to art school" recalls her decision of having to drop a potential training as a poet in order to become a botanist, after she is advised by 'everyone' that it is not possible to do both.¹⁴ This division of plants and poetry into two opposing camps, representing incommensurate systems of approach to the world, is new to Wall Kimmerer, whose upbringing within a Potawatomi cultural knowledge system had encouraged her to value the noticing of beauty, the asking of questions, and being inspired by the natural world as pathways to discovery and understanding. In pitting science against the poetic in defining the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, her college

¹³ Kimmerer, *Sweetgrass*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

education subtly works to begin erasing her cultural identity.¹⁵ It is not that the asking of questions has stopped, but that the questions that she is now expected to ask are premised upon and maintain a worldview that objectifies and silences those things that it examines. They bring with them a baggage of conceptual schemata and constrictive human agendas:

In moving from a childhood in the woods to the university I had unknowingly shifted between worldviews, from a natural history of experience, in which I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not "Who are you? " but "What is it?" No one asked plants, "What can you tell us?" The primary question was "How does it work?" The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The way botany was conceived and taught didn't seem to leave much room for a person who thought the way I did.

It is only, after years of scientific training, in attending a talk by "a Navajo woman without a day of university botany training in her life"¹⁶ that she re-members the knowledge of her upbringing that holds central a wonder at the beauty of the world - the worlds of plants; their names, their stories, their likes, their offerings, their relationships and alliances, their teachings. She concludes that the exclusion of questions of beauty that is a casualty of the scientific separation of the observer and the observed (de-emphasising relationship) doesn't make these questions less legitimate; it just means that science is not adequate to all the questions that she wants to ask. And, of course (remembering the 'what we learn' implied within the 'how we learn'), if certain kinds of questions are excluded by the scientific approach, then so are certain kinds of answers.

Many herbalists would have stories of an early enthralled entanglement with plants

¹⁵ "The professor made me doubt where I came from, what I knew, and claimed that his was the right way to think. Only he didn't cut my hair off" (ibid., p. 41).

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 42, 44.

similar to that of Wall Kimmerer.¹⁷ As echoed in Nikki Darrell's invocation of the 'questions that little kids ask', this kind of wondering curiosity and enchanted vision is frequently associated with childhood and the loss of it with an entry into the world of adulthood with its values and institutions, and it is common for herbalists to advocate the inhabitation of 'a child's perspective' in learning to connect with plants.¹⁸ Within Wall Kimmerer's account, however, although her story of enforced disenchantment at the hands of a college education marks a transition from childhood to adulthood, it is the entry into a white institutional cultural sphere and associated colonialist knowledge system that is the more pertinent factor (as it is in renewed contact - through an elderly woman - with the values of Indigenous knowledge frameworks that she rediscovers the value of curiosity). In each case, the vantage point of childhood represents a relative freedom from the influence of externally imposed and internalised values; a state of world-participation that precedes a cultural paradigm of estrangement. Irigaray (who has a similar story of a childhood communion with nature until she was "removed from this Garden of Eden" by the commencement of her schooling) connects it with the (also) basic function of breathing; a kind of openness to the world that allows us to absorb understanding directly (the dual meaning of 'inspiration').¹⁹ A kind of porousness to the world, characterised by the preculturalised state of childhood, is conceived as something ontologically fundamental.

Robin Wall Kimmerer ends her chapter with a call for a complementary co-informing cooperation between the two different systems of understanding - a form of 'wisdom' exemplified by the complementarity of Goldenrod and Asters in their pairing of purple and gold ("the beauty of one is illuminated by the radiance of the other"). She asks: "science and art, matter and spirit, indigenous knowledge and

¹⁷ Some of these are documented in Guy Waddell's PhD work on herbalist entryways (*Enchantment*).

¹⁸ "Go to where the plants are" writes Carole Guyett in her 'Exercise to Connect with the Spirit of a Living Plant'. "Become aware of the beauty around you. Engender feelings of wonder and gratitude. Open your heart and become childlike" (p. 77).

¹⁹ *Through Vegetal Being*, p.33

Western science—can they be goldenrod and asters for each other?”²⁰ Within the Indigenous cultural context on which Wall Kimmerer draws, the poetic does not constitute an opposing paradigm (in the way that allows her college professor to consign beauty and wonder to the purview of the arts, with no place within the framework of scientific knowledge) but is rather an integrated element of a complete knowledge system.²¹ It is within the context of the hegemonic exclusivity of factual knowledge as knowledge within the EuroWestern paradigm - where poetry and the arts are non knowledge-yielding pursuits, where truth corresponds to objective reality and where plants are othered and objectified as unthinking things - that the idea of a poetic approach to plantwork as a mode of knowledge acquisition has radical potential. But again, this is not to reinscribe the binary that Kimmerer challenges. The point is to create space within the paradigm that structures our shared reality for that which is othered and excluded by it, but is nonetheless deeply implicated within it (is its obscured ground). Epistemological shadow work, perhaps. As poetic modes of praxis are manifest within plantwork, they work together with - and through - abstract knowledge forms. “I really love being bilingual” enthuses Cristina Cromer; “I don't speak any other language [...] but I can have a rational science-based conversation with a scientist about plants and I can also have a meaningful conversation with a medicine man about plants”. Nikki Darrell echoes similar sentiments: “at the same time [...] I do love being able to say “it's the proanthocyanidins in those berries that gives them that colour” [...] or] the isovalepotriates, or whatever it is. It's really handy that there's these very specific words that describe very specific molecules or aspects of the plant's structure or whatever, and they're fun too”. Guy Waddell also discovers “wonder in science” as a characteristic of enchanted herbalist practice.²²

²⁰ Kimmerer, pp. 47, 47.

²¹ “Native scholar Greg Cajete has written that in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (ibid., p. 47).

²² Waddell, p. 96.

In *Conversations with Plants*, Nikki Darrell tells a story whose features strike a contrast with that of Wall Kimmerer's. Her own upbringing was within a medical family. She studied plant science and horticulture at college, worked as a research scientist, and eventually qualified as a medical herbalist. "And then I was a little confused; there was something missing".²³ She joins a workshop with a plant teacher whose work she admires, and is dismayed when he warns that botanists and medical herbalists will find the work difficult - "too much head stuff, too many preconceptions" - as she felt herself "possibly the subject of a double whammy". As she wanders the gardens seeking a plant to work with, she finds her "inner botanist" and "inner medical herbalist" very vocal in her thoughts, and worries that she "might have some trouble hearing over those authoritative voices" but eventually sits down with the Ivy, determining to try her best ("I wanted to hear her story"):

Well, a miracle happened and happened so quickly my heart was bursting. As I looked at the ivy growing over the ground, I saw that the leaves looked like the alveoli in the lungs, spread out to absorb as much oxygen and sunlight as possible in the dark shade where it grew. Precisely ordered leaves, clear black smoke. My inner herbalist piped up with the fact she thought she had read something about ivy and respiratory disease; I told her to play the game properly. The ivy became a woman in a dark green dress; she told me that she draws the old, ancient deep dark grief out of the lung; our own and that passed down from our ancestors, she is kind and clears darkness. The stems were thin and green/brown in colour. The older leaves were eaten, the young leaves were bright green, spreading, very strong; when my inner child touched it, it entwined on her arms and she started absorbing green from it. My infant turned towards it, smelling its medicine, and the plant formed a crib to cradle her safely; clearing dark thought patterns.

When she returns to the classroom, she is excited to tell the story, but then finds herself sobbing. "That was the first time I experienced that gestaltian communication of emotion from a plant, a real demonstration of the kind of energy

²³ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 179.

that ivy shifts".²⁴ In this story, Darrell finds herself initially constricted in her capacity to connect by the expression in her thoughts of voices that represent her formal education, but by virtue of a determined resolve to listen and to hear through what she feels that she already knows, finds herself able to discern meaning in the plant's physicality before being drawn into a deep connection on multiple sensory levels. In this way, she is able to 'construct' "the story of ivy", thus (we might say) 'producing a plant that talks'. But again, this 'production' is not an imposed, but a poetic (in the phenomenological sense) production; a rearticulation of Ivy within the bounds of the relation, expressed by means of her interpretative understanding. A collaborative portrait. In the end however, the dynamics of the relationship become a little uneven, her artistic powers muted, as her own articulative input is overwhelmed by that of the plant and her words give way to emotion.

4.2 Defamiliarising and Disrupting

Strategies of Defamiliarisation

Practices of plant connection that emphasise curiosity as a childlike form of inquisitiveness aim to draw on a mode of participatory world involvement that recalls a pre-socialised state of being. However, the socialised self is not always easily quieted. A way of becoming acquainted with plants that Clare Holohan particularly enjoys is group tea-tastings where "you don't know what plant you're tasting or meeting". This kind of approaching a plant without naming it is one way of defamiliarising and disrupting one's habitual frameworks of perception to get to know a plant, and frequently used as a teaching aid.²⁵ It has the advantage of minimising the interference of what we consider to be our established knowledge in

²⁴ Ibid., p. 180.

²⁵ See too Robertson and O' Rawe, p. 56.

the shaping of the encounter because, in Holohan's words, "once you know a certain amount about plants it's really hard to switch off your brain". Instead, it allows for an amplification of the unknown, and of intuitive forms of response.

Disrupting Logos and the Socialised Self

Within a cultural context of plant othering and backgrounding, effort is required to break the influence of the habitual, such as an inherited regard for plants as resources.²⁶ Establishing boundaries through the construction of supportive contexts goes some way towards this. Defamiliarisation and disruption as tools provide an additional specificity of focus that can be directed towards particular elements of the interactions. Herbalism's characteristic uptake of a holistic model of approach is already, to some degree, a disruption of and challenge to the dominant cultural paradigm, even in its 'mainstreamed' instantiations. Holism understands illness as complex and situates it within a place of interrelation across diverse levels of experience within the patient's life. The influence and entanglement of the social, political, psychological, emotional are all acknowledged in the specific manifestation of illness; symptoms are generally the starting point for enquiry. The foregrounding of embodiment - the experiences of the body within a context of inter-relation - and the involvement and entanglement of the practitioner, disrupts the dominant logic of a logocentric framework, even when working with words. This entanglement and embodiment has implications for our conception of 'knowledge', as well as perhaps a disruptive political potency to "subvert the political order (in which biomedical, heterosexist, racist and sexist discourses dominate)",²⁷ enacting alternatives. An element of political disruption is explicit and intentionally amplified within the subfield of radical herbalism.

²⁶ "It's one of the most frustrating questions I get asked as a teacher at entry level" says Cristina Cromer: "what is this good for?" And if they're actually coming to school, if they're coming to class, I will jump on that. There's zero tolerance on that. You have to break that habit".

²⁷ Gale, 247.

Strategies of defamiliarisation/disruption are also used intentionally as a tactic of holding space for strangeness or uncertainty within plant encounters to create room for the perception of plant expressions. Deliberately disrupting those logocentric frameworks of approach (speaking about, speaking over, speaking for) that are culturally dominant and habitual is a way of making space for the emergence of other kinds of communications and knowledges (namely plant communications of plant knowings; sometimes by means of body communications of body knowings). Although conceptions of 'plant-knowing' and 'body-knowing' are often underlying premises,²⁸ to be able to accommodate and work with them still requires an effort of challenge to one's culturally ingrained habits and patterns of thought. Within plant engagements, practices that centre the body deprivilege thought as the primary site of interpretation (even though thought is still present). Sitting together with; tasting; quietening thoughts; the use of touch; an attention to inner feeling; practices of un-naming and re-naming, are all strategies by which a practitioners decentralise the function of *logos*.

As noted above, these disruptions of *logos* are, too, disruptions of the construction of the (logocentric, culturally determined) self. This disruption of the self allows space for the emergence of everything that is habitually occluded, or excluded, by its functioning. Nathaniel Hughes articulates this as the crux of what it is to meet with a plant:

It's very easy to exist in an identity that is socially defined. It comes to be defined by our culture and our human social interactions. That identity is generally not the place where the relationships with the plants emerge. So one aspect is being willing to let go of, you could say, that socialised ego. And of course it's not an easy thing to do, but the willingness to let go of it, the choice to let go of it, is important. And simultaneous with that is to choose to

²⁸ These terms are my own, but describe common ideological understandings; 'plant wisdom' is another term often used in the field.

invite the quiet, often wounded parts of ourselves to the table. So, say you go into a meeting with Nettle, it's not your socialised self that's going to form a deep connection. However, it may well be your two-year-old. And part of that is these parts of ourselves that you could call 'sub personality' within a psychological framework; they've been called 'soul fragments' within other, different frameworks. I would say that they are frozen traumatised parts. You could say they're traumatised ancestral threads; there's all sorts of ways to model what these parts are. But I have no doubt that we all have maybe thousands of these parts of ourselves that don't really get a voice in our day to day life. Choosing to let them have a voice. And let the plants help them find their voice. I'd say that's how it works.

It is the capacity for self-disruption, then, that is foundational to being able to engage well with plants on their own terms, as living beings. Beings that may heal us. Working through the socially-determined structures of the self is the access point from which we might work through the 'thought-language-habit nexus' that Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira identify as that which "habitually precludes our deep relationship with plants".²⁹ The idea of letting occluded parts of oneself 'have a voice' resonates with the expansion of ideas of articulation (as in Nicola Kay Gale's 'body-talk' and 'body-stories') to accommodate embodied, non-logocentric forms of saying. We can also see a resonance in this suspension of the logocentric self to enable the emergence of relational knowledge with the process of phenomenological bracketing.

Let's consider again the learning practice of meeting a plant without knowing it's identity. The plant is encountered via the senses; close attention is paid to one's responses: sensory information, feelings and images may offer clues as to the plant's character (and medicinal virtues). Thus the plantworker's own embodied and imaginative experience is foregrounded as a vehicle of intermediary communication. In this way, an effort is made to subordinate language to the service of other (embodied or imagistic) forms of communication, decreasing the influence

²⁹ *Language*, p. xx (see Chapter 2.2: 'Response: Learning and Thinking with Plants').

and primacy of a logocentric framework. The often-used language of the plant 'speaking' of itself, whether or not metaphorical, is indicative of an ideological framework underlying the work that involves an acknowledgement of and respect for the capacity of the plant to express elements of its own being and experiences by virtue of various non-linguistic (in our sense) modes of representation - with the body frequently the primary site of interpretation.³⁰ The plants 'speak' to our capacities of sensory (and other forms of intuitive) perception; and they are heard by 'listening' to our bodies' re-expressions of these encounters (emotions, sensations, associative images). Often, these sublinguistic articulations are then further translated into words that can be shared, recorded for recollection, and put into relation with other experiences/information in the distillation and construction a body of relational knowing of that plant.

To meet a plant in this way, developing familiarity through an array of sensory, energetic and imaginative modes of interaction, deliberately minimising the potential interference of predetermining knowledge (although still working within some of the systems of understanding - actions, constituents, correspondences that give us various angles of approach), enables a deep and intimate intuitive acquaintance that can then provide a meaningful context for knowledge subsequently acquired through book-based or other kinds of learning (or recalled, following the naming of the herb. The moment of naming is the moment at which a plantworker's interaction with the plant is brought back into the context of a logocentric, culturally circumscribed framework of knowledge; experiences and encounters categorised and labelled. The process above suspends this moment, creating space for alternative kinds of encounter, and thus the emergence of other kinds of (subjective, intuitive, relational) knowing, that can be put into play with the culturally and institutionally recognised kinds of (standardised, factual) knowing that

³⁰ Robertson and O' Rawe, p.59.

are invoked through the categorisation of naming.

Group sharing of experiences and intuitions constitutes a gesture towards bridging the gap between subjective and standard knowledges; overlaps and resonances within individuals' respective experiences indicate what of them might be most usefully taken forward for further exploration of the potential generalisable aspects of the plant's character.³¹ From a herbal practitioner's perspective, these are perhaps the most useful insights for the construction of a practically useful characterisation of that plant, to be taken forward and compared with the existing literature (perhaps scientific research; perhaps folk usage).

Defamiliarising as a Tool of Deanthropocentrism/Poetic Approach

The work of Eduardo Kohn again offers us theoretical insight into the potency of defamiliarisation as a methodology for engagement with non-human others. In *How Forests Think*, he notes that, whilst the potentialities of context-appreciation for catalysing paradigm shift is a thing long acknowledged in anthropology, the more-than-human perspectives that his work strives to inhabit - and that the Runa individuals with whom he works inhabit in their everyday lives - destabilise not just "the taken for granted", but the human itself.³² Defamiliarising, for Kohn, is an intentional strategy of "coming to see the strange as familiar so that the familiar appears strange".³³ In this case, the strange is the 'thinking' of the bit of Amazonian

³¹ Within homeopathy, this process of discerning a plant's character via overlap of subjective experiences ('proving') has been integrated with double-blind trial methodologies.

³² Kohn, p. 22. Again, as the ideas explicated and exemplified by Kohn in this work are drawn from participation within and observation of Ávila Runa cultural practices, credit for them must be given here (I say this explicitly not because this is absent in Kohn's work, but because the conventions of academic referencing do not typically make room for this integrity of acknowledgement of source - and in this I situate myself in the problematic tension between making efforts to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and re-uptaking distantiated Indigenous knowledge through intermediary sources). I find the consideration (and enactment) of defamiliarisation as a methodology for engagement with non-human others within Kohn's work to be resonant with elements of herbalist-plant engagements (as well as the function of poetry and the mechanisms of poetic practice) and an exemplary enactment of the call for academia to attempt to accommodate these kinds of knowledge with respect and integrity.

³³ A phrase drawn from the Romantic poetry of Novalis.

forest that is home to the Ávila community whose culture informs his understanding. This thinking is strange in that it is precisely not human thinking and its logics are the currencies of exchange of non-human living things. But connections of continuity between human and non-human thinking means that these forest-thoughts can be accessed and appreciated (and for the Ávila Runa, inhabited and interacted with). It is this continuity of human and other-than-human thought-forms that allows room for the perspectival play that defamiliarisation, as a strategy for inter-species interaction, entails. That enables the potential disengagement from one realm and inhabitation of another. Such movement is possible precisely because the logics that structure human linguistic thinking are emergent from forms of representation that we (can) share in common with other beings. An attention to these more foundational forms of representation whose logics ground our own - plant thoughts, forest thoughts - allows us to begin to open ourselves to co-existent worlds beyond the human.³⁴ It is this continuity that allows herbalists to tune into plants in such a way as can be characterised as 'conversations'.

The Ávila Runa are experts at disrupting their own human thought-logics to engage with the other forest beings (or spirits) with whom they share their world. Thinking-like, speaking-like, eating-like, moving-like their non-human co-habitants helps them to enter into ways of being peculiar to them, inhabiting their embodied perspectives. From this adeptness at moving fluidly between human and other-than-human worlds, Kohn finds inspiration for an 'anthropology beyond the human':

The logics of living dynamics [...] might at first appear strange and counterintuitive. But [...] they also permeate our everyday lives, and they might help us understand our lives differently if we could just learn to listen for them. Anthropology allows us to move beyond

³⁴ "Thanks to the ways in which language is nested within broader forms of representation that have their own distinctive properties, we are, in fact, open to the emerging worlds around us. [...] The goal is to defamiliarize the conventional sign by revealing how it is just one of several semiotic modalities and then to explore the very different nonsymbolic properties of those other semiotic forms that are usually occluded by and collapsed into the symbolic in anthropological analysis. An anthropology beyond the human is in large part about learning to appreciate how the human is also the product of that which lies beyond human contexts" (Kohn, p. 15).

our culture, but we never quite leave the human. What we are supposed to enter is always another culture. Ávila techniques of self-reflexive defamiliarization, Runa forms of anthropological wandering, by contrast, are not based on travelling to a different culture but on adopting a different kind of body. Natures are what become strange here, not cultures.³⁵

The cultivation of these skills is woven into the fabric of Ávila culture. Kohn discovers it in the ways that sleep is structured so as to maximise access to the liminal space of dreams (whose imagery is always the subject of efforts of interpretation); in hunting practices where hunters learn to see through the eyes of their prey; in the occurrence within the Quichua language of sensorily evocative sound-words like *tsupu* (the action of a heavy object hitting a body of water). Kohn's observations of Ávila Runa practices and culture offer an example of a conscientious cultural integration of habits of defamiliarisation of the human-centred shared world in order to (be able to) inhabit a broader shared real beyond the human (for various purposes - sometimes relationship, sometimes survival). It is an account of de-anthropocentric world-building in practice.

Part of the cultural anthropocentrism that the Ávila Runa must counter in maintaining these possibilities is an entanglement with European colonialism and white settler culture (the tensions and navigation of which is discussed in the chapter 'Human, all too Human'). The herbalisms that I draw upon in this project exist in cultural contexts (mainly white, European) in which this anthropocentrism is deeply and historically entrenched, so the practices of defamiliarisation look different here. Kohn himself, as a white academic, is working within a EuroWestern thought paradigm and the take-up of methodologies of defamiliarisation within his work speaks to the deeply entrenched linguistic structuring of EuroWestern culture. His own methodology focuses on defamiliarising conventional signs by bringing those fundamental forms of representation - the communicative currency of worlds

³⁵ Ibid., p.22.

beyond the human - within which our own abstract language is nested into view:

The challenge is to defamiliarize the arbitrary sign whose peculiar properties are so natural to us because they seem to pervade everything that is in any way human and anything else about which humans can hope to know. That you can feel *tsupu* without knowing Quichua makes language appear strange. It reveals that not all the signs with which we traffic are symbols and that those nonsymbolic signs can in important ways break out of bounded symbolic contexts like language.³⁶

The 'human, all too human' within which we are, within white European culture, always embroiled is a world of anthropocentric estrangement, structured by the deeply entrenched and pervasive logics of rationalism and its foundational abstractions as they are internalised, naturalised, and reflected back by their material inscriptions, and all the ideologies of power that they support.³⁷ The defamiliarisation of the signs by which this 'all too human' world is constructed is another mode of space-clearing within thought; the stopping of the hundred radios. It offers a space, and a portal, for stepping into a different mode; a means of working-through. With these insights, we can recognise Guyett's use of symbols as tools of connection, facilitating the recognition of the sacred within the everyday, and the entry into ways of being and spaces wherein plant interaction and exchange are made possible as a form of defamiliarisation of the symbol in its (merely) symbolic function. What is made strange is the abstract function of thought and its construction of the self as individuated and apart.

Such perspective then gives us some tools with which to break the constraining dominance of our thought-language by enabling an appreciation for those broader more-than-human contexts of which our own human being is a part and a product. And, more than this, it gives us a possibility for understanding the logics - or

³⁶ Ibid., p.42.

³⁷ The phrase 'human, all too human' Kohn draws from Nietzsche, who posited that we exist in a world of 'fictions whose fictionality has been forgotten' and whose philosophy strove to deprivilege consciousness, engaging the embodied and affective (which efforts informed his writing).

'languages' perhaps - that structure them, and of which our own (emergent, abstract) logics and languages are both a part and a product. That is, for grounding in the ecological shared real *through* the everyday real; in the 'larger mind' that is the ground for our own thinking.³⁸ This working *through* is expressed by Kohn in his ambition "neither to do away with the human nor to reinscribe it but to open it".³⁹ But it is not an easy task! Moving beyond our ingrained habits of dualistic thinking, he writes

requires us to undertake an arduous process of decolonizing our thinking. It asks us to "provincialize" language in order to make room for another kind of thought - a kind of thought that is more capacious, one that holds and sustains the human. This other kind of thinking is the one that forests do, the kind of thinking that thinks its way through the lives of people.⁴⁰

Kohn's asking us to 'provincialise' language in order to allow for the emergence of something more expansive - a more capacious and inclusive kind of thinking - resonates with Nathaniel Hughes' invocation of "being willing to let go of [the] socialised ego" - a provincialisation perhaps of the logocentric self - to allow for the emergence of other aspects of our being; those that might reveal our ecological inter-implication with a broader sphere of existence and with which relationships with plants might be cultivated.

Within our own culture, sound-words, like *tsupu* tend fall within the domain of the poetic; it would be an example of the 'poetic device' of onomatopoeia (although Kohn's own analysis extends beyond this). On this understanding, its meaningfulness is expressed by virtue of its affective charge, which connects us to qualitative aspects of the thing that it conveys. Poetry, within our culture, as we saw earlier, uses language in such a way that brings it to light, inviting our inquisitive

³⁸ See too: Abram, pp. 263, 262.

³⁹ Kohn, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.224.

attention. The seeming identity of the word and its meaning is called into question, its self-contained stability disrupted; instead, poetic words are overburdened, multiple, open, ambiguous. Meaning that within other contexts we would take for granted, within the context of the poem becomes uncertain and open to interpretation. Thus the habits of self-obscurment by which language presents itself as a transparent vehicle of meaning are disrupted as it is held up for our questioning attention. In these ways - inviting us to question the identities and the functions of words - poetic engagement offers tools for defamiliarising the language with which we are thoroughly written through and that permeates all of our thought and action. Disrupting the habitual functions of language as a tool of abstraction and putting it into the service of the imaginative and the sensory, the poetic offers support for the decentring of *logos* through the thought-language-habit nexus that shapes the self. In this way, poetic language rediscovers, within the language that colonises our thinking, those sub-linguistic (or extra-linguistic) flows that animate it. Whilst phenomenology understood this in ontological terms, on an expanded understanding of language as an ecologically grounded, emergent phenomenon, we can see that this has the consequence of bringing it closer to the communicative exchanges of other than human living things, including plants. Language in its wordly guise remains a limit here; poetry cannot speak in volatile essential oils, or geospatiality, or electrical signalling. But it does take language to the limits of what it can do and be. It calls language back from its distantiated self-referential abstraction to a place of contact with the meaningful flows of the world in which it is rooted - making it vulnerable once more to presence and the unknown. And for us to take a poetic approach (one of disruptive dissolution of identity boundaries; of interpretative openness and ambiguity, possibility and 'play') to language and to our own logocentric selfhood, can help us to make ourselves porous to the presence and particularities of plant others.

Strategies of 'making strange' within plantwork can be helpful in breaking the ingrained cultural habits and acquired cultural attitudes that foreclose openness to whatever plants may have to tell or show or give us. Carole Guyett articulates this in terms of dissolving the boundaries of the ordinary world, which boundaries are equally facets of our own perception. Dissolving these boundaries allows us to engage our language in the service of other forms of communication:

If we allow those kind of boundaries to dissolve then a whole different system of communication sets in. [...] I might have what in my brain comes across as a conversation, using verbal language, but it's not really that the plant is using verbal language; it's just that my brain is translating what is coming from the plant into verbal language, because I just feel like picking it up as words, or the plant wants me to pick it up as words. [...] It's not really 'speaking' in the human way. But it's a useful tool for trying to communicate together!

For Guyett, there are many ways of going about dissolving the boundaries of the habitual: journeying; "simply being in nature"; using sound; dance; "all sorts of ecstatic practices"; working with entheogens; touch ("just by touching a leaf and feeling the vibration and starting to feel that in your body"), and the plant dieting that is a cornerstone of her own practice. Or again, they could be conceived as a form of 'provincialising' of the self and its thoughts to allow us to 'move beyond' its boundaries, making ourselves porous to the 'more capacious' thought that is the thinking of the world. In some of the methods that Guyett mentions (ecstatic practices for examples), perhaps we might succeed in surrendering thought - our mind-thought - entirely to other embodied ways of being. But as far as (our habitually linguistically-structured abstract) thought is put into the service of those expressive flows (those flows that characterise the thinking of the world) that ground it, or offers a bridge by which we might bring them back to infuse our lives and habits, I characterise them broadly as poetic forms of practice.

Herbalist Disruptions of the Self as Radically Potent

Herbalist practices of intentionally disrupting our ingrained habitual logocentrism to connect with plants enact forms of knowledge generation that challenge positivist paradigms. Approaches that foreground or incorporate intuitive techniques offer an account of knowledge as something relational, experiential and subjective, in quiet disruption of the cultural norm of knowledge as 'objective'. Frequently, there is an emphasis and focus on the primacy of the body - in relation with plants - as a site of original knowledge generation. In this emphasis on embodiment there is a quiet disruption of the mind-body dualism that underpins human exceptionalism. Within the cultural context wherein Kohn develops his analysis, engaging with plant (and animal) others necessitates a disruption of the human ('all too human'; which designation on the part of Kohn speaks to the cultural mixing and entanglement - particularly with white settler culture - of Ávila life). Within our own self-enclosedly anthropocentric, ecologically estranged and destructive cultural context, engaging with plant others necessitates disruption not only of the human, but also the human exceptionalism (and indeed the white supremacist and patriarchal logics) that is built into our culture and our social and political structures. Thus the use of intuitive practices are politically potent.

Part of the aim of this thesis is to make the case for herbalist relationships with plants as sites of knowledge and the practices by which they cultivate those relationships as forms of knowledge acquisition. And, more than that, to accommodate and amplify them (which I do by means of a poetically informed framework). It's not a call for a replacement of analytic forms of knowledge with relationally-derived ones. Each serves a diverse function, which diversity, within a broader framework of epistemological heterogeneity, can be complementary. For herbalists that work directly with plants, this multiple holding of diverse knowledge forms as complementary is characteristic. Carole Guyett articulates that, within her

pedagogical practice, intellectual learning can function as a platform for intuitive discovery as much as it can be a hinderance, finding that, for a lot of students, “once they learn some actual basics of plant knowledge then their intuition really can start to expand and flow”. “As a herbalist you're putting the two together all the time” she adds. For anything to be a recognisable field of practice, collectivity (sharedness) is an important element. And the collective cultural holding of medical knowledge within a EuroWestern cultural paradigm happens predominantly within science. As Cristina Cromer observes, science is “part of our current story [...] one of the mainstays of our current civilisation, and so we [herbalists] have to be proficient in it, we have to have fluency in it”. And, moreover, it offers forms of knowledge that are unavailable within non-positivist forms. “It’s important that we know about pyrrolizidine alkaloids, for instance” she states. “We have to be safe”.

Cultural holding is necessary, because the sharedness of knowledge allows not only for its communication and the establishment of herbalism as a field of practice, but also for the examination and regulation of that knowledge. It is problematic, however, that within the EuroWestern paradigm this examination and regulation (scientific verifiability, and evidence-based medicine, for example) is written through with logics and dynamics of power, as well as upholding notions of objectivity that exclude non-normative vantage points, with research frequently funded by pharmaceutical and other vested interests. ‘Proving’ may offer a process more akin to ‘feminist objectivity’, which draws its strength from a consideration of multiple situated experiential perspectives⁴¹. However, working from situated perspectives cannot easily compete with the proficiency of randomised controlled trials and evidence based medicine for repeatability and reach. Anna Tsing makes this observation when she identifies the interruptive unscaleable nature of storytelling, or storying as unsuitable for frameworks of modern knowledge on account of their

⁴¹ Sandra Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: ‘What Is Strong Objectivity?’ in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 49-82., p. 65.

non-scaleability. Her mushroom-inspired analyses recognises the sugarcane plantation as the model for scaleable capitalist expansion (an ideal complement to colonialism and a driver of modernity), whilst the 'mushroom forests' whose harvestability requires highly skilled foragers to scour the landscape for telltale signs - slight bumps in the earth, faint wafts in the air - she conceives as 'anti-plantations'.⁴² Although I seek to emphasise their radical potency, it is likely that relational forms of herbalist knowledge will continue to occupy a position of disruptive complementarity, supplementing and offering subjective nuance, depth and colour to institutionally acceptable 'factual' knowledge. Perhaps the foremost immediately practicable disruptive potential of the development of intuitive and poetic practices is on the level of our own relationships - with our selves, with each other, with plants and the living world around us. Poetic practices open up knowledge production to collaboration with the more-than-human. What difference does it make for one's knowledge to come from direct interactions with a plant rather than from a herbal manual? I'd venture that it's something to do with care and connection. Relationship-derived understanding serves principles of relationship and respect, rather than human exclusionism and dominance; knowledge is no longer solely mediated by text and fact, but is experiential, attentive, participatory. And this relational composition of knowledge in turn has implications for the composition of our identities; it serves an idea of our selves as - not thoroughly individualised and self-sufficient, but - relational and ecologically implicated.

4.3 Attunement

⁴² Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 38. Stacey Langwick also discovers community gardens in Tanzania as exemplary instances of disruptive non-scaleability, which characterisations resonate well with the ideas of gardens as spaces of herbalist-plant co-creation discussed in chapter three (Langwick, p. 434).

The Concept of Attunement

Curiosity draws people into encounters with plants, engendering an openness to their 'solicitations' or what is sometimes referred to in plantwork as their 'call'. Actively disrupting the familiar is a tool by which the curious inquirer might begin to get past the obstacles of inherited and internalised anthropocentric rationalism. At this point, skills of perception come crucially into play. As already noted, the Western cultural inheritance is one of ingrained plant obliviousness; many of us have internalised these habits of simultaneously backgrounding and instrumentalising the plants that enable our existence. To undo this means conscientiously cultivating those skills of perceptive attention that would welcome them back into our fields of awareness. Learning (or re-learning) to notice plants, and perhaps, after this, to 'listen' to them, and then perhaps to hear them, and learn from them, and then perhaps, to know them intimately and understand them, and to take action to live well together with them, is a journey with many layers of depth. However it is one that figures prominently in the self-conception of each of the herbalists who have contributed to this project as regards their work. Typically, these skills are conceived as latent, or inherent, such that their acquisition is a matter of 'remembering'.⁴³

Inspired by Matsuke mushrooms, and those that live on the edges (literally, often; in makeshift camps along verges) to forage them, Anna Tsing similarly appeals to us to develop 'arts of noticing' as a way of responding to Anthropocene destruction (or of navigating the 'blasted landscapes' of capitalist ruin). For Tsing, and many of those she describes, learning to how to notice (an aromatic waft; a 'gentle heave' in the ground like "the breath of the mushroom"; an area "where the soil looks right")⁴⁴ is a means of overcoming alienation and 'opening our imaginations' to recognise and

⁴³ In Cristina Cromer's words: "I remind people that we're just using skills that we have anyway. The skills that you use when you go to the supermarket and scan the shelves and decide what to buy is exactly the same skill set that you can apply in the forest; it's just that the context and the knowledge base is different".

⁴⁴ *Mushroom*, p. 242.

enact our realities of (interspecies) entanglement. Noticing helps us to make room for the lives and worlds and worldmakings of others with whom we share our realities of precarity. It means involving ourselves in 'polyphonic assemblages' - open-ended gatherings of resonance and connection, and implies temporalities of presence; that we shift our gaze to look around instead of looking forwards. The cultivation of these arts Tsing conceives as an answer - a strategy - to her underlying question (which also underlies this project) of "can we live inside this regime of the human and still exceed it?".⁴⁵ To learn how to retrain our perception to reorient our gaze beyond our human-reflecting habit-world gives us a link to something beyond ourselves; a bridge; a way through.

Learning how to notice is a first step, but it goes deeper than this. The term 'attunement' has a history within phenomenology (for Heidegger, 'fundamental' forms of attunement are those ways of being that disclose the world, and 'fallen' modes those that foreclose), but I take it up here in a non-technical sense. Attunement to plants might involve a capacity to perceive (via a persistent and purposive noticing) some of their ways of expressing themselves; and maybe to recognise the relationships that constitute their worlds, and the patternings that structure them. I like the word 'attunement' because it describes both a process and a state, incorporating the idea of development. As a quality of our being-towards or being-with plant others, it indicates a sensitivity to those flows of being, or representational logics, that characterise plant ways of being. An attuned attention lets us perceive, and perhaps resonate with, these flows where they touch us. It also describes the practice of trying to access this place of sensitivity and resonance. Through active efforts of attunement, we become more attuned, manifesting attunement in our relations. It also incorporates an element of feedback; a double directionality. It is a structuring intention of careful focused paying-attention-to that

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.15.

at the same time creates space for, and thus illuminates, elements of the other; it reveals. And it is a strategy of approach; a way of quieting ourselves in attempting to get closer to something like an understanding of the experiences and perspectives (arising from the different embodied world-being) of the other. In this way, it is related to empathy (which I'll talk about in chapter six) – an effort to hear underneath the 'white noise' of those more prevalent and habitual aspects of communication that separate and individuate us to discover possibilities of resonance and connection.

Like Tsing's 'polyphonic assemblages', attunement is partially a musical metaphor. The quality is one of resonance, of striking chords, or of being in key with one another; it invokes the pleasure of harmony. The accordant metaphors of listening and (in a deep sense) hearing are also appropriate in conceptualising attunement for their qualities of active receptivity. When we practice careful attentive listening with an openness towards the other we develop our skills of attunement. Although this cultivation of skills likely involves the development of all of our senses, as well as other modes of perception, the ear is the metaphoric sense organ for attunement. On one level, the ear might be conceived a passive orifice - a hole into which all sound pours in indiscriminately, unbidden - but the perceptive act of hearing involves incredible sensitivity. American herbalist, Stephen Harrod Buhner, talks about the experience of being able to discern certain words in a flow of conversation; the experience that we've all had of 'having our ears prick up' at the mention of our name.⁴⁶ From the same sensory input, we can learn to 'hear' things that others can't. Developing the skills of attunement involves learning to pick up on and discern those things - plant 'sayings'; the "meaningful solicitations of the larger, more-than-human field"⁴⁷ - that typically pass by our conscious attention - which

⁴⁶ Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm: Beyond the Doors of Perception into the Dreaming Earth* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Company, 2014), p. 37.

⁴⁷ Abram, p.9.

learning may well involve multiple levels and layers of our perceptive capacities. Often, walking outdoors, I am stopped in my tracks by the sudden perception of a recognised scent in the air - something that I know - and then I know that a particular plant is close by (my attunement to the volatile compounds of certain plants helps my body recognise that “smell... is a sign of the presence of another”).⁴⁸

Developing Sensory Acuity and Intuition

The sensory appreciation of herbs using hot water extracts - ‘tea tasting’, or in its more technical guise, ‘organoleptic assessment’ - is a well-established method within herbalism, ‘tuning in’ to the qualities and the character of a plant. Non Shaw and Christopher Hedley share their experientially and pedagogically honed method of getting to know a plant via tea tasting. They emphasise the comprehensively engaging, expansive and connective character of this rather humble activity:

By ‘tasting’ we mean the appreciation of a herb using all the senses - in a similar manner to the techniques used in wine, tea, coffee or chocolate tasting. [...] We have added the traditional concept of ‘appropriations’, that is, the appreciation of a remedy by the whole body, not just by the special senses. The taste in your mouth is the beginning of your understanding of a remedy but a full appreciation comes only after feeling how it interacts with your body and observing its actions in a range of people.⁴⁹

Of the twelve steps that they outline, the first ten contain a directive to “notice”, “look for”, “appreciate” or watch. As the taster smells, sips, savours and swallows

⁴⁸ Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 45. These thoughts are also echoed again in Nathaniel Hughes’ conception of each plant as having a physical being, a scent being and a pheromone being, which in the Spring time start to expand such that the scent being becomes much larger than the physical being.

⁴⁹ Hedley and Shaw, pp. xxxvii - iii. The use of the term ‘appropriations’ finds interesting resonance with the term as used in Heidegger (*ereignen*) to describe “an activity or process [...] by which the different members of the world are brought into belonging to and with one another and are helped to realize themselves and each other in realizing this belonging” (Albert Hofstadter, ‘Introduction’ to *Poetry, Language, Thought* by Martin Heidegger, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. xix).

the tea, they hone their attention upon their own (physical, mental, emotional) responses, observing the interaction of the plant with their embodied feeling self. At each point, they are also quietly note-taking (“jot down your impressions as you work - try to avoid medical and technical language and preconceptions”) attempting to unobtrusively translate sensations, feelings, images into words that can offer pathways of recall or re-access at a later moment and allow for experiences to be shared. The last two steps are forms of imaginative articulation; the eleventh instructs the taster to attempt to describe the experience as a whole using “it is like...” formulations, and the last one asks them to translate their perceptions into intuitions concerning therapeutic potencies, thinking about “what sort of person might benefit from this herb”.⁵⁰

Shaw and Hedley’s process is designed specifically to emphasise, amplify, and hone a person’s capacity for “whole body” - and indeed, perhaps, ‘whole being’ - appreciation of a plant’s particular qualities and characteristics - resolutely deprivileging the intellectual knowing of one’s ‘preconceptions’ within the approach. Or rather, thought and language is put into the service of these attentive, embodied appropriations, as sensations, textures, moods and movements are jotted down in words as on the go ‘impressions’. In doing so, the taster begins to open up a more meaningful space-in-common between themselves and the plant, expanding the bounds of their own ‘hearing’ (perception) of what the plant has to ‘say’, by refining their capacities for perception - and finding ways to articulate these in their own language. These articulations are reiterations - translations - of qualities of the herbs themselves, as they strike us in relation. For the student of herbalism, the perception of different affective qualities - a dryness in the mouth; a heaviness in the limbs - might also be translated into herbal actions or constituents. Thus learning to notice and differentiate between them also offers a means of being able

⁵⁰ Hedley and Shaw, pp. iii, iii.

to 'read' the herb in its potential medicinal virtues - which experientially anchored understanding can then feed into and support theoretical ones.

As a person becomes more skilled at this practice, their capacities of perception, and of articulation develop. Clare Holohan of West Highland Herbal recounts her own learning:

When I first started doing [tea tastings], it was like, "err, I don't know; it tastes like... soup! [...] But now I can taste the tea and be like, 'there's saponins in that' or 'there's glycosides'. [...] Being in tune with your own body helps you to understand where a plant's going in your body. [...] It's just like anything; the more you do it the easier it becomes.

Here, sensory intuition - an attunement to the interactions between the plant and one's own body - is put in the service of technical knowledge. And, at the same time, we might presume that Holohan's vocabulary and knowledge of plant constituents supports her capacity to intuit the character of the plant. Thus the two modes of knowing support one another. When matched with technical knowledge, the development of these skills of sensory perception support the practitioner's capacity to make informed assessment of a plant's potential medicines. "Indeed", says Nikki Darrell, "our senses (once trained) are better at this task than any machine". She understands the development of attunement not only as enabling of a practitioner's capacity to assess and to choose plants as medicines, but also as a mode of engagement appropriate to the plants themselves; a form of right relationship that empowers and amplifies plants as living beings and as teachers, with implications of challenge to our cultural paradigms:

We need to engage as many senses as possible in order to truly listen to our plant allies and our patients, and to be holistic in our assessment of them. We have tended to become extremely reductionist in our relationship with our plant allies, relying on analytical facts, labelling, putting in boxes rather than remembering that they are living sentient beings who share their meanings with us, who are healers in their own right, and that our role is to listen

to the people and listen to the plants; our skill is in knowing them well enough that we can see which plant will help to re-align the person at that particular time into a healing balance.

When Darrell invokes us to cultivate 'as many senses as possible' her understanding is expansive. Her detailed list of the perceptory capacities available to us comprises: olfaction; olfaction and chemoreception; touch; taste; sound; sight; synaesthesia; feeling perception (the 'heart perception'); gut instinct (our 'gut-brain'); and common sense ("if it does not look right, smell right or feel right, do not taste it").⁵¹ In this way, the practitioner cultivates not just knowledge, but relationship.

Clare Holohan also describes her practice of asking plants their permission before harvesting, which typically involves a moment of allowing space - a moment of listening - to "get a sense of whether something feels good or something doesn't":

It's not an easy thing. Because asking permission of a human; you just say it don't you?! It's a non-verbal thing really. Which is always challenging. Sometimes [...] you might have an idea about what that plant is saying; sometimes it's super clear, and other times its not [...] you're just kind of trusting that it's okay. [...] There's different ways that I use to tell... mostly just being a bit quiet and a bit still before harvesting, seeing if there's anything that comes. [...] And then, sometimes you can feel there's a bit of resistance within the plant and it's like 'well, maybe that's a sign that it's not the right time', or 'that plant doesn't want to be harvested just now'. [...] You've just got to go with what you feel.

Holohan's practice foregrounds the 'feeling perception' or 'heart perception' that Nikki Darrell includes within her list, creating space - by being quiet and still and focusing her attentions - for the emergence of whatever might come up that might give indication of the plant's 'wants', or 'what that plant is saying'.⁵² The reiteration of the practice of asking permission helps to habituate a mode of active intentionality towards the plant that is grounded in and enactive of a relationship of

⁵¹ *Conversations*, pp. 11, 18, 11.

⁵² Cristina Cromer, Nathaniel Hughes and Carole Guyett all also centralise 'the heart' as a perceptive organ in their descriptions of their work.

ethical recognition of the plant as possessive of its own meaningful and purposive being independent of human agendas.

The kind of intuitive thinking, explored here in the context of practitioner-plant relationships, can also inform the processes of clinical reasoning, by which medicines are formulated and plants matched to patients. Clare tells a story of the weaving of intuitive thinking into her clinical practice alongside other knowledge forms, in which continual adjustments to a patient's prescription was yielding no results:

And then I was sitting in clinic with her one day and Herb Robert just kind of came into my head. And I'm like 'really?! Really?! ... Okay!' So sometimes I just get these, kind of like, feelings, or the plant will just appear in my head or it'll just come to me, and that's [...] one of those situations where I'd be like 'okay, why is this plant in my head? Is it suitable for this kind of situation?'

Having checked the plant's suitability by means of research, Clare then added it into the mix, and the returning patient reports successful results:

She said to me, "what did you change?!", and I said, "well, the last time we were sitting in clinic this herb just came into my head, Herb Robert" and she said "oh, no way! That's all over my garden!" And so it's just things like that that will also guide what kind of medicines I use. And sometimes I do ask people "is there anything growing in your garden?!" After that! Sometimes those are the exact plants that they need. So it's kind of weaving the logical thought processes and the kind of feeling side of it again.

In this situation, Holohan's formulation of a remedy was influenced by a thought of a particular herb that occurs to her unexpectedly, and from outwith her own conscious deliberations. She acts upon it, questioning and interpreting its potential significance, by way of analytic thought processes; mapping it onto what she already knows of the plant or can find out through research. These processes of the incorporation of non-analytical knowledge processes are considered by Denham

and West within the framework of dual process theory (a model from psychology theory that considers the interplay of intuitive and analytic processes within cognition): “these are examples of calibration in dual-process thinking – making a conscious check that initial thoughts are appropriate”.⁵³ The use of intuition within the context of clinical reasoning has also been interpreted through the theoretical framework of ‘tacit knowledge’ which describes a form of ‘know-how’ rooted in practice and experience,⁵⁴ thus it may be grounded in experience that includes analytic thought-processes, but manifests through non-conscious ones. Holohan’s own analysis refers her intuition back to the plant itself: “it does take a bit of trust - trust in your own intuition. But then, you know, when you think about it, it's coming from the plant - that's not just you - so when you've got trust in the plants then it's easy!”. Thus her attuned relationship with the plant supports and grounds her use of intuitive thinking, in interaction with analytic modes, within her practice.

The process of actively creating space within the encounter for the emergence of the input of plant others is, as I said earlier, often conceived as ‘listening’; describing an active, attentive, receptivity. But it is a listening that crosses the boundaries between the senses - engaging sight and smell just as much (likely more) than hearing. There is resonance here with the ways that we attend to poetic texts, allowing words to strike us in their sensuality and shapeliness, feeling their form and the resonance of their sound. This notion of listening, as creating space for - eliciting by means of allowing and enabling - occurs repeatedly in herbalist narratives. Guy Waddell recalls Christopher Hedley’s approach to patient interactions:

[...] Look closely, and listen closely: they will tell you what’s wrong with them; listen longer

⁵³ West and Denham, 58.

⁵⁴ West and Denham, 59; O’ Rawe, (n.p.).

and they'll tell you what to do about it.⁵⁵

And in his own thesis work, nine out of the thirteen herbalists whom Waddell hears tell of their entryways into working with plants (his own methodologies also echoing the strategies of listening and creating space) mention listening as crucial to what they do in one way or another. One references his mother saying about him from an early age "he'll sit and listen", later identifying "the quality of human attention" as "the usual conduit for medicine to be successfully introduced and for healing to take place".⁵⁶ Another claims that the skills that he brought to herbalism was "being quite good at [being] a listener".⁵⁷ Another echoes Christopher Hedley's words: "basically just sit, shut up and listen. And listen, and then, listen to what people are really saying",⁵⁸ and there are more besides. These accounts of developing understanding through listening to a patient tell their stories (of symptoms; of circumstances) accord easily with conventional ideas of listening with our ears to words spoken. But other modes of listening come into play too: two herbalists give accounts of listening to plants in their childhood, one describing "sitting at the top of the hill and listening to the trees and hearing what they had to say"; another recalling "conversations with [...] trees, listening and tuning into what they were telling her about themselves".⁵⁹ Another describes helping a patient to find his own medicine by guiding him "to listen out for a plant"; another "listens to [her patient's] chest with a stethoscope"; another "listened to her intuition and found a medicine that she could not justify at the time".⁶⁰ These accounts expand the concept of listening to include more embodied modes of listening, or listening to bodies, or 'inner' listening.

⁵⁵ Waddell in Hedley and Shaw, p. xvi. "And then they pay you!" he continues, with characteristic humour. "It helps if you have white hair and look deep into their eyes: they will think you are wise!".

⁵⁶ Waddell, pp. 211, 224.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 247.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 133, 236.

'Listening', then, as it is deployed as a fundamental tool within herbalist practice, takes myriad forms, but generally works to facilitate a space of connection in which the articulations of that which one is listening to (be it a plant, a patient, or one's own body) are given space. It is always active, always engaged, always discerning, always taking note and translating. Very often it involves elements of trust (the trust to hold back and allow space for emergence, trust in one's own capacities of perception and interpretation). Although this space frequently requires the holding back of structuring preconceptions - a temporary de-emphasising and de-privileging of their influence within the bounded space of the encounter - it also often retains a connection to, and is entangled with, intellectual or analytic ways of knowing (the 'logical thought processes' that Holohan mentions) and feeds into and supports these. Most plantworkers who work with intuitive methods - and all qualified herbalists on account of the structure of their training - would regard analytic or intellectual approaches as indispensable to their practice and, indeed, as Carole Guyett articulated, the two modes of knowing, and of understanding, consistently feed into and support one another in the development of plant relationships. Clare Holohan talks of the importance of having 'the whole picture':

For me it's important to have both of those strands [...] I can't have one without the other. I might have had a certain experience with a plant or a feeling about it, but I also like to back that up with knowledge [...] or what I feel like I know. And vice versa. Because you can say 'oh this plant is good for headaches', but then knowing it and feeling it and having experienced it, you would know that it's good for *this* kind of person with *that* kind of headache rather than just 'headaches'.

Similarly, Cristina Cromer speaks of the need to confirm and validate intuitive experiences with other forms of knowledge; the need to "triangulate on the map" subjective relational knowledge with collective knowledge, and in particular with scientific knowledge. The attentive 'listening' of herbalist practices of attunement then, is not about abandoning the map, but decreasing habitual reliance upon it,

allowing that it sometimes be laid aside, so that one might notice all of the other unmapped tracks and trails, or the other ways of perceiving the terrain, that would be otherwise invisibilised by its authority. It is a working within the framework of what is already known, to create space for emergence and discover depth within it. In the same way that phenomenology works through the immediately apparent functional world to elicit and illuminate the for-itself, or poetry works through language to discover sensuality and affect.

Herbalism is well characterised then by the 'arts of noticing'. They are honed by the practice of perceptive skills (whether in 'listening to trees' as a child, or through intentional structured methods of tea tasting) which capacities feed into the development of attunement. It is a process of persistently 'tuning in' to become (hopefully ever-more effortlessly) 'attuned'. Herbalism is a site wherein the poetic arts of eliciting the essential particularity of the world (the plant and its virtues; the patient and their story) weave with other forms of practice. It is also a site wherein words are frequently put into the service of the sensory and the embodied; of plant affects, and patient afflictions, or practitioner intuitions. Often words function as doorways to the experiential; jotted 'impressions' guide Shaw and Hedley's students back to their perceptive experiential knowings; patients' carefully attended to stories guide the practitioner to an understanding of individuated sensation or experience. This cultivation of relationships, and relationship-based knowledge, alongside (within and through) socially accessible forms of knowledge constitute the herbalist's skill as an intermediary between plant and patient. Nikki Darrell writes:

We deepen our relationship and knowing of the plants, incorporating information such as their constituents, their properties, their general uses, and we also sit with them to deepen our relationship with them, and we continue to do this as we do with dear friends, with people in our community. We deepen our relationship with them so that when we are asked to we can match up that sacred knowledge with what we read from the person asking for

assistance; we listen to the person's story very clearly and we never make assumptions.⁶¹

This conception touches upon the multiple identities of herbalist praxis: as science or field of intellectual knowledge (the plants' constituents and uses); as an art form (matching up people and plants); as a form of (sometimes therapeutic) witnessing and of ecological community-building (as practitioners sit, and listen, and deepen their relationships with plants and people); and as a spiritually-imbued activity (as practitioners gather and hold sacred knowledge). This chiasmatic, conjoining function of herbalism is reflected in the relational position of the herbalist; working always within an interstitial space of relationship, creating connection. The skill of the herbalist themselves is thus central within herbalist praxis. A deepening of one's capacities of attunement to the plants and people with whom one is interacting, as living complex 'wholes' (if relational and indeterminate ones), provides the critical foundation for the facilitative work of translation and transformation expressed within the medicine-making and treatment elements of practice.

Dropping into Relationship

Central to all of the herbalist practices and techniques considered to this point is the effort to cultivate relationship. It is relationship, too, that is central to the research questions that drive this project: "what do ecologically appropriate relationships with plants as living others look like?"; "how to cultivate them?"; "what can we learn in this regard from herbalist-plant relationships"; and "what are the implications of these kinds of relationship?". For Nikki Darrell, these relationships are existentially constitutive: "with plants we have a relationship [...] that actually makes us more whole because it broadens who we are". This "relationship with plants makes us feel more whole [...] because it's not just a cerebral connection"

⁶¹ *Conversations*, p. 64.

but one that invokes 'kinaesthetic sensing', 'kinaesthetic memory', 'the heart brain' connected to the limbic system through which we can perceive electromagnetic resonance, the 'gut brain' that "when we're nibbling on things around us [...] gives us a sense of belonging", and other "aspects of us that are maybe not so valued in our culture". "That indicates to me", says Nikki, "that there is something about having that relationship with the plants that actually is a natural way of being for humans".

Carole Guyett similarly expresses her experience of that relationship as a deeply felt ontological entanglement:

At the same time, I feel like part of me is plant. And we're all connected. [...] It's just a feeling thing I suppose. I suppose it's like a kinship, that I feel.

This consistent feeling of ontological inter-being has also manifested for her in particular experiences within what she names as 'the dream'⁶² of "being a plant [...] actually physically having the body of a plant or living other lives of plants". It also finds an intellectual element in her understanding of "everything in life as connected" such that "we are automatically in relationship". This 'automatic' relationship is the ontological ground for ontic relationship and encounters. Cristina Cromer articulates what it feels like when she tunes in to particular plants as, "a sense of being accompanied", drawing parallels with the feeling of pregnancy:

In the sense that there's... it feels... it doesn't feel like me. It feels like another person - if you'll excuse the term - another being, that's not me. [...] I have to sort of turn towards it. I have to turn my attention towards it, and as soon as I turn away my attention, it slides out of my awareness. Which is why we turn away from the natural world because it's not intrusive. [...] We evolved in the presence of the plants. Does the child notice its mother when it's swimming in her womb? Of course not. And it's a similar sort of thing.

⁶² Which terminology references Indigenous modes of participatory relationship.

Nathaniel Hughes (from whom I draw the phrase 'dropping into relationship') also understands a deep ontological entanglement as the ground upon which any ontic relationships with plants are possible:

I would start from the point that the relationship is a given, it exists. And that that relationship is an intrinsic part of the ecology of simply being human. It's like it's not a question of making a relationship with a plant; that plant is already in relationship with me through my entire ancestry. There's absolutely no way my whole being has come into being without that relationship. It's hardwired into me. From an evolutionary point of view, from a physiological point of view, from an ancestral point of view, that relationship just is.

This characterisation, and the imagery of 'dropping into', resonates again with an idea of 'going down'; into our bodies and into our evolutionary and ancestral roots.

Each of these descriptions articulates the process of coming into relationship with plants as the active realisation of a relationship that is already there, and, more than this, is fundamental and constitutive. It is a conception that resonates with the premise put forward by phenomenologist David Abram in *Spell of the Sensuous* that "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human". This necessary contact and conviviality, for Abram, refers to the ecological embeddedness of human being - "our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape" - within which relationships we make sense. For Abram, it is the 'many voices' of the landscape that underlies our own capacity for speech; the rich sensorial depth of the world that underlies our own capacities of sense perception; their inherence in a vaster 'sensorial field' that makes possible the thinking of our own minds; and the vibrant vitality of the living world that makes possible our own emergent and estranged modes of existence:

Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have

formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth [...]. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.⁶³

Plants 'make us more whole' and 'broaden who we are' (Nikki Darrell's words again) because they are an integral part of that 'animate earth' with which our bodies have formed 'in delicate reciprocity'; they engage us on those manifold levels of our being that reinvolve our 'carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities'. To engage with plants in particular ways is to inhabit the participatory, ecological being that is the ground for all other modes.

The 'arts of noticing' then, as applied within plantwork, are equally arts of remembering. Their purview is as much our own being, as that of the external world. The 'attunement' of plantwork is this recognition of our own ecological world-being, a realignment with the more-than-human matrix within which our being makes sense. The acknowledgement and actualisation of our particularised, situational selves as emergent from an elemental interimplication. Philosopher Timothy Morton describes this elemental connective resonant being-in-common as "the noise made by the symbiotic real as such"; to consciously enact relationship with non-human others is simply an admission of the base-level existential solidarity, "default to the biosphere", that makes solidarity between beings (human and otherwise) possible. The 'human-correlated world' is, for Morton, a 'severing' from, a distortive denial of, this baseline ontological kinship between all beings - the 'symbiotic real' that "requires no maintaining by thought or human psychic activity".⁶⁴ Thus, in Nathaniel Hughes's words, "as we deepen into relationship with the plant, it is impossible that we do not deepen into relationship with ourselves". It is a matter of undoing our

⁶³ Abram, pp. ix, 22.

⁶⁴ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 14, 14, 23.

inculturated obliviousness and allowing plants the space to extend up into our thought-being, from without and from within. Of learning how to welcome plant being into our own to let it infiltrate again, like weeds growing through concrete, our culturally, anthropocentrically constructed habitual being.

Plants are very good at bringing to attention those hidden aspects of our own experience - our own being - that we don't often pay attention to (or have suppressed). Like the way that Rose can carry you easily into a heartspace, of truth, honesty and vulnerability. The way that Ivy might help us to access grief. Or Oak might help us to remember our strength. They are good at bringing to our conscious attentions our underlying needs, propensities and patterns. This is one of the ways that plants serve us as medicines. But within this relationship of ecological reciprocity, we also serve plants. Guy Waddell recognises the enchantment of plants as their agential solicitation; plants invoke this attunement in us. Thus the conviviality that characterises herbalist-plant relationships is expressive of the reciprocity of the relationship. Plants and herbalists, he surmises, are each others' 'convivial tools':

Not only are herbs the convivial tools of herbalists, but herbalists can be seen as the convivial tools of herbs. This would require that herbs have relationships with herbalists, possess an energy that is under their control, enrich their environment with varieties of herbalists that benefit herbs, and that the meaning of plants is expressed in herbalists.⁶⁵

Plant-herbalist relationships on this account express the deeply participatory, ecologically reciprocal inter-relation of plants and humans that Nikki Darrell understands as our 'natural way of being'. One answer then to the question of the implications of herbalist-plant relationships is existential. We are truly and authentically who we are in relationship - in contact and conviviality - with plants.

⁶⁵ Waddell, p. 279. The concept of 'convivial tools' draws on the invocation by one of his interview informants of the work of Ivan Illich.

And plants as 'herbs' are who they are in contact and conviviality with us.⁶⁶

4.4 Imag-ining

Imagination and Poetic Making

In a detailed examination of 'the Movement of Making', Western analytic philosopher Elaine Scarry discovers imagination to be at the heart of the process of creative production by which we remake the world (that which we've also understood as the act of *poiesis*). Imagination is, for Scarry, an exercise of "the capacity for self-extension"; a form of conceptual projection (vision, dream, desire) existing as "imaginary objects [that] appear in the mind".⁶⁷ In the movement of making, imagination is the making up on the way to making real. Scarry's occurs within the context of an analysis of pain, and here imagination is conceived as both a transformation of and thereby a counterpoint to the pure, objectless sentience of pain; one moves from an individuated objectless state (pain) to one that is, conversely, "wholly its objects" (imagination).⁶⁸ The imagination creates 'fictional objects' out of feeling, which 'fictional objects' can then be remade again into 'real' ones:⁶⁹

The human imagination reconceives the external world [...] by, quite literally, 'making it' as knowledgable about human pain as if it were itself animate and in pain. When the roar of the floodwater comes, water and rocks and trees are mutely indifferent, but when the mythmaker recounts the story of the flood, the tree is invested with the capacity of compassionate speech: "I too feel the waters rising, and see that you will drown; take hold of this branch." His fiction of object-

⁶⁶ This insight is also echoed in Keith Robertson and Danny O'Rawe's question "is a herbalist a herb's way of expressing itself?" (*Celtic*, p. 50).

⁶⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 162.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

responsiveness anticipates the actuality of object responsibility, for though the tree does not speak, when it is itself remade into raft or boat (as when the indifferent rocks are rearranged into a dam), the world outside the body is made as compassionately effective as if every line and nuance of its materialised design were speaking those words. We come to expect this of the world.⁷⁰

On this account, through imaginatively reconceiving the world around us as sharing in our own inner world, made increasingly tangible in words and in objects, we remake the already existent. This is, for Scarry, the gesture at the heart of all making.

Sometimes these desires-made-material then crystallise within the artefact (the raft, the boat) and are forgotten within it. The artefact does the work of holding this meaning within itself and we encounter it, typically, in these terms (the predominant kind of thinking that sees a boat immediately, straightforwardly and sufficiently as a boat). However, sometimes this dynamic process of creation is not quite finished, but held open within the object. For Scarry, this happens with poems. The poem (as an artwork) presents itself (as do all artworks) as a question; its meaning is not yet fully determined in advance or hidden by its completion as a useful functional object, but solicits our creative interpretative engagement for its completion (Scarry thus regards poems as failed artefacts in this regard). Where the poetic gesture is concealed in the completion of the object as 'raft' or 'boat' (its meaning immediately apprehensible), in a poem (whose meaning is rather more ambiguous) the poetic gesture remains discernible... and desiring. This is part of the usefulness of the poetic for us. The human-remade world, then, is full of these original desiring gestures. Everywhere we are surrounded by material metaphors for human experience (the chair as a weariness-feeling-wished-gone) that we overlook by virtue of their being so functionally familiar.⁷¹ We can see in Scarry's picture, the beginnings of the anthropocentrically structured and reflective world described in

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 280, 289.

⁷¹ But we don't tend to perceive it as such. If the artefact retains this original desiring gesture in its form (the chair as a weariness-feeling wished-gone), this is generally forgotten in its familiarity. This forgetful, functional familiarity is Heidegger's 'ready-to-hand'; the familiar named object concealed in its practical being.

the previous section. Our world is one of inscribed, enduring, forgotten fictions-made-real; we operate amidst these concretised abstractions, whose meaning is so well established that we can apprehend them immediately as such, with no labour of making sense. A poetic mode of approach to the things of the world, which conscientiously measures this habitual unthinking projection of already-understood-meanings, allowing space for ambiguity and particularity, resolutely refusing to take for granted, is one way by which the boundaries of the culturally-constructed immediately apparent may be breached. The desiring gestures that Scarry sees concealed within the concreteness of made-things may become visible once more, just as a poetic attention might discover a gestural address resonant within the word-bound poem.

For Scarry, the imagination creates 'fictional objects' out of embodied experience. What are these 'fictional objects' of the imagination? The dualistic paradigms of EuroWestern thought consigns imagination firmly to the realm of the 'not-real' and Scarry's analysis does not challenge the binary.⁷² The qualification 'fictional' designates that these 'objects' are precisely not 'real' ones - (and, for Scarry, it is only upon undergoing a further rearticulation on the material plane that they become real). Imaginary things are things in which it is nonsensical to believe. But they are also not nothing (that they can have any kind of 'object'ness at all betrays this). Imaginings, like 'fictions', have a kind of relational reality whose subtleness cannot be accommodated by the rigid categorisations of Western metaphysics. They are given life within the context of the relationship. Nikki Darrell encapsulates this in her recollection of "talking to a group of students one day and saying "just because it's in your imagination doesn't mean to say it's not real" and then going 'that was a funny way of putting it!'" It is a funny way of putting it, precisely because 'in your imagination' means 'not real' within our (EuroWestern) culture. However,

⁷² Matthew Hall makes the same observation of myth (*Imagination*, p. xxii).

where plant thought and plant speech are also categorised out of reality, to embrace the imagination as a tool of connection enables an accommodation of subtle realities otherwise excluded. 'Imagining' then, within the context of plant encounters, does not refer to the realm of the 'not-real', or the 'imaginary' to that which does not merit belief, but rather, describes an interaction with an imagistic space - an ontologically blurry between-space, outside of the constrictions of reality and belief. It is a space of possibility with a lightness - a freedom and fluidity of form - that is unweighted by the presence of both immanent sense experience and the fixed materiality of the objective 'real'. Existing between the two, it is both subjective and shared/shareable.

Cristina Cromer considers the imagination not only as a form of output, but also as a sense by which the world can be perceived:

[...] People would say "oh, she's an imaginative child", almost as if that was a criticism. "It's just your imagination", "you're imagining it", in a dismissive way. Even as a child, I knew that my imagination was as important and as valid as my sight, my hearing, anything else; it was another sense, special sense. It wasn't a 'sixth sense', or you know, a psychic sense; it's a way of sensing the world.

Nikki Darrell echoes these sentiments:

When we're young, we're often told "oh you just imagined that" or "you're just imagining it" [...] whereas actually it's part of our sensing of things. So I think sometimes we describe things as imagining when we're actually getting those communications. And so that's one aspect of what we call imagination. People will often go out to sit by the river or with the plants and then they go "well, I probably imagined it, but this is what it felt like" because they're protecting themselves from being laughed at. Because that's what they're used to happening. And then you can say, "well, no you didn't imagine that, you actually you sensed something, and you did it really well".

On Scarry's account, the imagining of the world, its rearticulation as image, requires

a further translation into materiality before the world can be remade within the relation as making sense to us. However, for Scarry, our imagination is cast onto and recasts a mute, inert world of unsympathetic materiality; one that is “immune, inanimate, inhuman” and ‘indifferent’.⁷³ This picture is one of human exceptionalism. In its urgent desire to remake the world as responsible, it misses the subtle responsivity of the world as *already* alive, animate, and, in fact, agential. On this picture, humans make the world responsible to their needs, but fail to be responsible to the needs of the world. It misses the opportunity for true co-responding. And in conceiving the world this way, it is thoroughly irresponsible - for we don’t even have the possibility of taking into account the desires of the tree when we cut it down to make a raft or a boat or a chair. Or, more likely, when we browse chairs in the aisles of Ikea.

For those who work with plants as living beings, imagination interacts with a world that is already thoroughly alive and independently interactive. On these accounts, the imagining rearticulation of the world is not merely a unidirectional projection, but can also function as perceptive. We do not just remake the world in our own image, but open ourselves up to those aspects otherwise excluded by objective reality - such that this remaking is a co-creative endeavour; a poetic remaking within the bounds of the relation in a way that elicits and amplifies the being of the other. In *Plants Have So Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do is Ask*, Wendy Makoons Sisiip Geniusz tells of the usage of the bark of the Birch tree - *Wiigwaasi-mitig* - for waterproofing canoes. Within an Anishinaabeg cosmology, *Wiigwaasi-mitig* is ‘Grandfather Birch’, and he gives his gifts willingly for the help of humans.⁷⁴ Scarry gives us to understand the process by which we create sympathetic counterpoints in the material world (with no regard for the desires of the world itself) but these worldly ‘sympathies’ are already there; plant being exemplifies this. The canoe is

⁷³ Pain, p. 289.

⁷⁴ Geniusz et al, *Plants*; pp. 51-2.

perhaps a human wish to not be land-bound inscribed in tree form, but it is also a gift from *Wiigwaasi-mitig* in appreciation of human needs. The human need for the alleviation of pain is an area in which plant responsibility excels. As anyone who finds an alleviation of their cramps in the quieting properties of *Viburnum opulus* - Cramp Bark - knows. Or tired eyes with Eyebright. Or a red raw throat with soothing, mucilaginous Slippery Elm. The idea of the world as wholly indifferent and hostile does not recognise the ways that the world is also giving. The idea that we have to forcibly inscribe responsibility or responsibility on the world around us fails to see - or denies - that which is already there.

But Scarry is not our posterboy for plant obliviousness. In fact, the picture given to us here by Scarry of an inert, external nature finds a striking counterposition in another paper, written a little over a decade later, that explores the link between flowers and the imagination. Why is it, Scarry wonders, that “a blossom lends itself to being imagined” so vividly?⁷⁵ In answer, she posits that there is something about flowers themselves - in particular; their size, their shape, their localisation, their rarity - that “expresses the distinct quality of cognition at work in imagining.”⁷⁶ That is, the way that flowers are in the world - their own ‘experiences’ - is resonant with the way that our minds imagine, such that when we see the flower in our mind’s eye, it is in fact “the interiorization of the flower into the brain.” She continues:

It is not our intellect that is being conferred on the plant, but the plant's on us. In picturing a flower in the brain,⁷⁷ it is the plant's own strange cognition or subcognition that is being used to display the peculiar nature of imaginative cognition. What is imagining like? Like being a plant.

If we seek to inscribe our felt experiences onto ‘the external world’ by means of

⁷⁵ Elaine Scarry, ‘Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)’, *Representations* 57 (1997), 90-115 (91).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

imaginative projections, it seems that that world also finds ways to inscribe its experiences on us.

Scarry's surprising characterisation of flower-being as precocious to human imaginings anticipates work being done in contemporary plant scholarship that seeks to engage the imagination as a tool of plant responsiveness. In *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination*, John Charles Ryan underscores the importance of a collective re-imagining of relations with the living world on 'non-appropriative' and 'non-hegemonic' bases for any kind of response to environmental crisis, and posits botanical poetry as one medium through which such imagining can and does take place. For Ryan, the attentive perceptive entanglements of the botanical poet with the sensorial being of the vegetal creates a thoughtful space of imaginative interaction by means of which the plant asserts a vibrant presence within the work:

Through intuition, attention, and sensoriality - in conjunction with ecologically-grounded witnessing over time and usually within the bounds of a place - contemporary poets versify a particular imaginative sphere. This is 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 poetic work. This "opening of consciousness" (Bachelard 1971, 5) takes poetry beyond the unidimensional representation of plants in language and - turning to embrace botanical being - imbricates vegetal percipience within the substance of poetic imagination itself. In receiving diverse sensory impressions from the plant, the poeticizing mind enters a field of concurrence - a plenum, a poetsphere - between vegetal nature, personal imagination, and collective cognizance of, and between, life-forms.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ John Charles Ryan, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 9.

It is the imagination for Ryan that opens this space wherein plant presence actively mingles with poet thought, and the rearticulation of these plant-poet comminglings within the substantial form of the poem constitutes a co-creative remaking. In this picture, the continuation of the poetic movement in the production of the poem is a collaborative one. By means of the poetic imagination, plants inscribe their being into human language (a process that Ryan has come to name 'phytopoetics').⁷⁹

Similarly, the idea of inscription is explicitly mobilised by Patrícia Vieira to conceptualise the way that plants (and all beings, humans included) imprint themselves "in their environment and in the existence of those who surround them"; that which she names 'phytographia' articulates these embeddings and entanglements on the level of "human cultural productions", her focus particularly drawn to literature and "the imprints left in texts by the plants themselves".⁸⁰ The "longing for inscription" or "the wish of all things to persevere in existence, a yearning that leaves traces in and through other entities" is premised as ontologically basic, and thus the primal desire for articulation within, through and upon the world that Scarry recognised in the human imaginative-creative movement of projection and production is seen to be characteristic of plant being too; and "a possible bridge over the abyss separating humans from the plant world".⁸¹ For both Ryan and Vieira, the literary or poetic imagination and the 'opening of consciousness' that it facilitates is particularly adept at accommodating this quietly pervasive and pressing plant presence explicitly within human thinking. More than this, for Ryan, this field of interaction is one wherein the faculty of imagination itself is no longer constricted to the human, but is conceived "in ecocritical terms as a multispecies interplay of the emotions, minds, and actions of humans, plants, and

⁷⁹ See also Jacobs, 'Phytopoetics'.

⁸⁰ 'Phytographia:', p. 218.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 218, 217.

others". It is a space wherein the possibility of plants' own "imagining us in return" is accommodated by virtue of the porousness of thought to sensuality. Wherein "the vibrant matter of vegetal life governs the form of expression and of imagination".⁸² On these accounts, the sentience and sensuality that precipitates the projective movement of the imagination is not just that of immanent private human sense experience, but the rich and interactive sensuality of the world.

Entering Imaginal Realms

This capacity of the imagination to create space within thought for plant imag-inings by virtue of its projective and perceptive functions is invoked within visionary forms of plantwork practice. Elisabeth Brooke offers guidance for connection:

Then, going a little deeper, close your eyes and turn your eye inwards and downwards and focus in on the emotional nature of the plant. If this plant were a person, what kind of person would they be? What would their character be? How would they dress? How would they walk into a room? What would their energies be like? Check out any feelings that come up; where in your body do you feel them? Allow any images or memories to come up and remember them, and then let them go without judgement. Going deeper in, feel the heart of this plant, their essence. Allow them to envelop you, enfold you, and absorb you. Follow where the images lead you. They may make no sense to you, but just allow them. Remember them and then let them go.⁸³

The self-conscious projections of characterisation give way to something more passive, as the plant is given space within feeling to 'envelope', 'enfold' and 'absorb'. This 'going deeper' is a movement from a structured imag-ining to something more like a dreaming; allowing the images to take over and flow, watching them, going with them, following them wherever they lead. This kind of

⁸² *Botanical Imagination*, pp. 8, 9.

⁸³ Brooke, *As Above*, p. 706.

intentional conscious 'dreaming' in collaboration with a plant is known within plantwork as 'journeying'; a form of structured, intentional meditation, in which a person 'makes a journey' within an imaginal realm.⁸⁴

Journeying is a technique sometimes made use of in plantwork to get to know or deepen an encounter with a particular plant in a focused immersive and exploratory way. Journeys may or may not be guided by a voice facilitating the story, offering observational prompts or giving instruction, and there is typically a temporal boundarying of the space. The imagining is a collaborative endeavour, occurring across the spectrum of relationship (between person and plant) within the moment of the encounter, but greater skill means that a person is able to move through this imaginal realm fairly effortlessly, allowing more room for input from the plant within the creative production of the story with which one is participant in a way that the experience is more flowing and dreamlike. That is, the space of allowing expands. Becoming more skilled at this practice then involves learning to subdue one's own conscious input, creating more space for the input of the other within the collaboration, which input manifests itself more immediately within one's thought-imaginative experiences. That elements of what is experienced may constitute projections is considered an integral part of the learning: disentangling what may have come from where (where images and experiences may be reflective of aspects of our selves, or our psyches) is the work of self-reflexive interpretation. Recognising that the plant's self-expressions are accessible only through our own subjective, interpretative frameworks of perception offers a pathway for the self-reflexive

⁸⁴ I consider the practice of journeying here within this bounded context of plantwork praxis within a EuroWestern cultural tradition rather than its many instantiations within other traditional and Indigenous cultural contexts. However, in specifying these parameters I simultaneously note the difficulty in doing so; amongst contemporary Western herbalist forms of practice, this is one that is frequently entangled with the influence of other culturally specific forms. For many, this entanglement would be an example of the kind of cultural exchange that "throws light on our own tradition and makes us look at it again" (Hedley and Shaw, xxi) in response to the problems of discontinuous lineages of practice, the sort of 'borrowing an ember from a neighbour's fire to relight our own' (to paraphrase a commonly invoked metaphor from Caitlin Matthews) that acknowledges resonances between traditions, however this is also an area in which issues of cultural appropriation arise. At the very least, I clarify that the descriptions and conceptualisations here pertain to practices of journeying as they occur and make sense within this particular cultural context and are not intended to speak for any others.

exploration of one's own (perhaps subconscious) input and its import (a part of the healing aspect of the practice). The practice of journeying facilitates a meeting of the plant within a co-created imaginal space whose boundaries are supportively expansive. Through journeying, one may be able to meet the plant a little more on its own terms, by relaxing for a moment the perpetual thought-language-habit consolidation of the self.

Strategies of Imag-ining: Suspending Disbelief

Anthropologist Sabina Magliocco offers a participatory account of the practice of journeying from her work with modern pagan practitioners in the United States. She observes that, within collaborative ritual contexts, belief is both integral to the success of certain procedures and performances, and also a product of those procedures and performances.⁸⁵ This observation alludes to the reifying capacities of imaginal spaces, which reification is an integral step within the process of creative world-making; in the situation she describes what is created is a collectively held cultural faith. But within individual plant journeys perhaps what is created is another level of depth in an individual's relationship with the plant - or understandings that can be shared or worked into practice. But belief is a strong requirement for participation for many whose cultural inheritance (of secular rationalism) does not tend to admit of a fluid spectrum of reality. The point is rather to lay such dualistic categorisations aside and interact in other ways that facilitate a broader scope of admission of our sphere of experience and action in the world. This understanding is not oppositional to that of Magliocco, who references Starhawk's characterisation of witchcraft as based in 'connection' rather than 'belief' - a "participatory relationship with the natural environment". She considers the magical training that "prepares Pagans to experience the world from a more participatory standpoint" in

⁸⁵ Sabina Magliocco, 'Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness', *Western Folklore*, 71:1 (2012), 5-24 (7).

terms of an art: “[l]ike art, the goal of magic is to bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness - that allow participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world”.⁸⁶ Magliocco’s understanding highlights the strategic nature of the practice, invoking imaginative connection as a means of transgressing the constrictive boundaries of the epistemological-ontological paradigms of belief and reality, and her characterisation of such practice as an ‘art form’ accords with Starhawk’s own conceptualisation of witchcraft as a poetic religion. Each of which insights is applicable to forms of poetic connection with plants.

Magliocco seeks to recharacterise belief as fundamentally contextual; “not the opposite of reason”, but “a state of conviction that is reached in a different way, with different evidence”, which is to say a participatory orientation towards the world.⁸⁷ Within the participatory plantwork of herbalism however, which (whilst often involving spiritual elements) is neither a religion nor a spirituality, belief is much less a factor and, I would argue, outside of the framework of dualistic thinking is irrelevant and inappropriate. I also contend that to understand these practices through a framework of the poetic, as Starhawk conceives her religion, offers us tools for this. One in particular is the literary device of the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (which Magliocco also considers) - a much weaker requirement. But enough to allow us to enter into imaginal spaces through the culturally-determined thought frameworks of Western rationalism and to then incorporate those experiences as part of our reality. The potency of this is that it enables us to be present with, and admit of, things that we could not easily (or at all) accommodate within our habitual consciousness (which is, of course, the work of healing). That is, working through the thought-language-habit nexus. Moreover, to conceive these

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 11-12.

practices through the culturally familiar lens of the poetic allows us to accommodate these practices of entry into imaginal spaces (and the knowledge that might arise from them) within and *through* EuroWestern cultural thinking.

The 'willing suspension of disbelief' - a phrase coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the attempt to skill his rationalist Victorian readership in the art of being entertained - involves making oneself suitably suggestible by laying aside habits of scepticism. This temporally bounded "poetic faith"⁸⁸ is a prerequisite for being able to interact with literary spaces on their own terms. The cultural habits of doubt with which Coleridge grappled have a foundation in Cartesian scepticism which, laying the foundations for Enlightenment rationalism, extolled it as a tool of the rational mind. Only a process of rigorous disbelief yielded the kind of certain objective knowledge that truly justifies belief. It is now a linchpin of our contemporary cultural paradigms; scientific method in particular, which recoups knowledge as the distilled end-product – a nugget of certainty - of a negative process of doubt, involving the testing and attempted disproof of necessarily falsifiable hypotheses.⁸⁹ To suspend it sidesteps this constraint of rigorousness. It allows us to relax this demand for justifiability, to engage imaginatively with a story upon terms appropriate to it; a shift in modes of consciousness. Carole Guyett suggests a similar strategy of intentional collusion for those who might find it difficult to surpass the obstacles of doubt:

If necessary in the beginning stages of your time with plants, tell yourself you are playing a game and pretend that you are communicating with the plants. Trick your mind and allow your imagination to lead you.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) p. 208.

⁸⁹ As famously defined by Karl Popper.

⁹⁰ Guyett, p. 77.

The familiar idea of a 'game', or 'pretending' offers an understood framework by which we can create the necessary space within our thought-structured habits of world-relation for appropriate engagement; a space of play. It is a strategy of entry into a state of being where imagination can then take over. It's a strange idea. What does it mean to trick the mind?

Actually, returning to Descartes for a moment, we recognise this kind of strategic imaginative 'tricking of the mind' in the process by which he questioned the very foundations of thought by calling into doubt everything he thought he knew. Given that doubting the reality of one's own hands and feet, and the armchair that one sits in, and the fire in the grate, is rather counter-intuitive, the degree of disbelief called for by such thorough standards necessitated a few tricks of imaginative self-deception, including, variously, imagining himself trapped in an eternal dream state, and mind-controlled by an omnipotent malevolent demon. To truly, rigorously disbelieve required a suspension of his mundane, practical disbelief. Using this strategy of imaginative extreme disbelief to claw his way back to a full and logically satisfactory picture of reality, Descartes' account of his strategic imaginative disbelieving with its climax of rational discovery reads like a story; one man's solitary journey of the mind to the edge of reason and back. Certainly (whether or not he actually did sit down in his armchair and heroically doubt his way to the holy grail of the *Cogito*), told this way, his arguments are helpfully bolstered by persuasion and interest. Curious that the philosophical birth of our epistemological paradigms of rationality should have been entangled with these poetic techniques, of discovery and of articulation. But the storytelling is obscured by inconsequentiality; the story is of Reason and the triumph of the philosophical mind, and reason doesn't care for stories.

We find this mechanism familiar and prevalent within many of our everyday habits. Sabina Magliocco observes the extent of this familiarity, to the point that she posits

a willing suspension of disbelief as, in fact, a baseline for functioning:

Many aspects of our everyday existence require willing suspension of disbelief. Bypassing the obvious examples like the value of paper money, the very problem of consciousness - the fact that the only way we know we are sentient and conscious is through our senses and consciousness - requires a certain amount of acting 'as if' in order to overcome. [...] The problem of death also requires a certain suspension of disbelief: we all know that we are mortal, and that death can strike us at any moment, yet we must all live by making long-term plans, taking on jobs and projects and emotional commitments that we may not live to see fulfilled. If we did not suspend our disbelief and assume we were going to be around tomorrow, we would become paralyzed with anxiety. We can see that belief and participatory consciousness, far from being signs of irrationalism, are in fact ways of knowing humanity, our ability to make plans, form relationships, empathize with others (including other life forms), and create art.⁹¹

This insight speaks to the nature of the world as storied, and to the element of looseness (translation) necessarily involved in being a self, with one's own inner world and life-world, within a shared world. We participate in and collectively uphold stories that allow us to function well together, bridging gaps of difference, regardless of whether or not we're aware of doing so. Within many traditional and Indigenous cultures, the creation of stories is culturally integral. In EuroWestern culture, the trend is towards the obscuring of these socially-colluding stories. The being of artefacts; words; calendars and clock-time; the money that is central to the economy that structures our social relations, all hide the stories of their own creation. They obscure their art-ifice, striking us as objects already settled in their useful identity (what Heidegger named the 'ready-to-hand'), or empty vehicles, or as neutral, exchangeable equivalence. To rediscover the world as fictioned, holding open the space of the story, and of createdness, requires a conscientious effort of seeing through the immediately apparent.

⁹¹ Magliocco, p. 22.

We know how to do this, because (perhaps unlike Coleridge's audiences so entrenched in their rationalist mindsets) engagement with spaces of literary artifice - reading stories and poems, going to the cinema or the theatre - is an important part of our culture. That we regard these encounters as archetypal 'cultural' activities (where 'culture' is binarically opposed to 'nature') belies something deeper of our relationship to them. It is safe for us to suspend the generalised disbelief that is characteristic of our cultural logics in our interactions with the literary because these are designated spaces of art-ifice, created by humans, for humans, crafted from language.⁹² In fiction (a synonym for the not-real) for example, the others that we encounter - the characters - are artifice; ontologically unsolid, requiring our imaginative input for their existence. Any potential emergent meaning is already understood in advance as an artifice, a construction, a product of human imagination, and bounded by the beginning and end of the story.

To apply this mechanism to plantwork then, disregards this boundary, challenging the culture-nature binary wherein art and artifice serve to reinforce the human exceptionalism to which plant objectification and exclusion is a counterpart. When we suspend our disbelief in engaging with plants, the fantastic entities that we meet are not the products of human artifice, but fellow living beings with their own lives and purposes. Their roots are anchored in the same earth that we walk on. They are our living kin. Suspending our disbelief outside of the safe designated realm of human artifice to accommodate that which exceeds culture and control - to accommodate 'nature' in our thoughts - disrupts the logics of the self-reflecting human-structured world, opening it up to strangeness and uncertainty. In this way, it is radically potent; a tool for breaking through the anthropocentrically constructed

⁹² This is the cultural construction of the space of literature, but it is not my contention here that literary writing is, nevertheless, safe; in fact, the leeway or the licence given to the literary gives it a particular power to trouble the habits of anthropocentric amplifications of our language use. Which power-to-trouble I seek to amplify.

worlds of our everyday operation. Suspending our disbelief makes us porous to potential, allowing us to keep ourselves appropriately open to the otherness of plants, and whatever they might have to tell us. We have to relax the structuring impositions of linguistic thought as this is not the way that plants speak. To meet with plant beings on their terms necessitates disrupting those frameworks of belief and disbelief - and all the structuring categorisations of rational consciousness - that inform our ingrained habits of being-towards, to make room in ourselves for other modes of engagement appropriate to plant ways of being. A poetic mode of approach enacts a poetic cosmology wherein the subjective and the collectively apprehensible merge along a fluid spectrum of reality. What counts is not a person's belief or disbelief (an attitude towards reality), but rather the ways that we engage with things. We can augment and (re)create reality, or elements of the world around us, by virtue of an attentive, engaged, animistic stance towards it, or we can deaden it through object-ification.⁹³

Summary

This chapter looked at the practices and techniques by which herbalists cultivate relationship with plants. It explored in depth four aspects of the ways that herbalists approach or 'come to' plants as living beings: being curious, as actively manifested in the practice of asking questions; defamiliarising and disrupting the habituated and the known; 'listening' (by means of our myriad senses) and becoming attuned to the ways that plants express themselves; and imagining, as a form of perception, as manifested in the practice of journeying. Each of these aspects was understood as an element of a poetic mode of engagement, where our *poietic* creative powers are enlisted in the service of developing relationships with the living world (and in

⁹³ These points accord with Val Plumwood's refiguring of ecological ethics to centralise the question of what kind of 'stance' towards plants and other non-human living things we choose to adopt: one of 'intentional recognition' or of 'minimalist closure' (*Environmental Culture*, p. 149). Plumwood's arguments will be engaged explicitly in sections 5.1 and 6.1.

particular, plants) of which we are a part. These relationships were reiterated to be fundamentally constitutive of our own being as ecological, such that to cultivate them is less a matter of 'making' and more a matter of 'dropping into'; of remembering and nourishing. Thus, these kinds of poetic 'coming towards' are a way of precipitating and enacting the realisation of the being-with-plants that is descriptive of our own ontology. Exploring the ontological-ecological aspects of herbalist-plant relationships offered philosophical insight into to the question "what are the implications of these relationships?" in addition to the political insights also considered. The idea was also taken up that these relationships are constitutive for plants too: that herbalist-plant relationships have impact for plants as herbs; for who and how they are, which idea will be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Response and Responsibility

Introduction

In recap then, of where we've gotten to so far: practices of creating supportive space and techniques of attention and approach have been analysed as facilitative of herbalist-plant relationships, and as forms of working through the culturally shaped 'thought-language-habit nexus' that mediates our relationship with world, to dis-cover and to inhabit/enact the ecological inter-relationship that is the ground for working with plants. Their characterisation as poetic invokes phenomenological conceptions of the poetic as a mode of world-inhabitation - a particular way of thinking, expressing, doing - that discloses rather than forecloses (which '*poietic*' power we see latent in the 'literary' poetic). Taking cue from herbalist conceptions of developing relationship with plants as a realisation of something that is fundamental and given but typically obscured, as well as the understanding from the previous chapter of our habitual (abstract) language and thought as emergent from a vibrant ground of ecological exchange, the poetic disclosures of plantwork are conceived as revealing and enacting our own ecological interimplication, creating space for interactive exchanges with plants, as communicative, convivial beings. Thus we deepen our understanding of the philosophical/political implications of herbalist-plant relationships identified in the last chapter.

The last section looked at some of the ways that attention is offered to plants; ways of turning and coming to them, which is to say modes of approach, within the encounter. This section involves ways of responding well. It might involve something

of an internal ordering of the information received through paying attention. It is the point of re-cognition (although not necessarily cognitive) of the other and is also the moment at which we might begin to actively bring something of ourselves into the encounter. To invoke other plant-appropriate metaphors, we might consider this a moment of digestion, or of alchemy; a moment of mingling and exchange where we begin to incorporate something of the encounter into ourselves, and something of ourselves into the encounter. Thus it finds us entangled within a dynamic reciprocity; engaged and implicated. There is an ethical weight to this moment. What we choose to do with that which we've perceived, heard and understood - how we can and do react - is a question of responsibility. Developing the skills of 'responsibility' is thus an element of connecting well and appropriately with plants as allies, collaborators and kin.

5.1 World-Making Beyond Belief: Acting as Though

Cristina Cromer is wary of the suspension of disbelief as a strategy, suspecting an "element of cynicism" within it; that, in the pretending, we retain our underlying categorisations of the objects of our attention as "not true" but ignore this "in order for this thing to have some kind of validity". She prefers the concept of poetic license, which instead emphasises a space of play, without necessitating the kinds of self-trickery or pretence that Guyett suggests.¹ This is a subtle difference; the one aims to create space within our attitudes to the thing - the movement of thought with which we approach it - the other aims to create space within the structuring frameworks of conceptualisation in a way that "allows for things to be true" (rather than transferring "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination [...] poetic faith" from our "inward nature").² Her concern is reasonable;

¹ She introduces the concept of the 'suspension of disbelief' independently as a counterpoint within a discussion of 'poetic licence' within the interview.

² Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 208.

we can see that it's not difficult for reason to perform these kinds of recuperation when the suspension of disbelief occurs only on the level of thought, as with when we close the book, or leave the theatre, or as with Descartes' return to the world of everyday functionality where his hands and feet are not demonic delusions. But it is also true that, as a strategy, the entry into the liminal space of the imag-inative that this 'pretence' affords - perhaps opening into that quality of flow where the images take lead - offers a space for poetic remaking; a platform or a portal by which, from this space of the precedence of the image, the movement of making can continue.

Nikki Darrell articulates this potency with the idea of 'acting into the feeling'.³ In the same way that "if you're feeling really annoyed but you make yourself smile it changes the chemicals we're producing in our bodies and after a while you'll be authentically smiling", the imagination she considers "can be a gateway for people" to drop into a space of imaginative participatory connection:

You say 'okay, you might not believe that you have any capacity to do this [...] but imagine that you can sense what the tree is trying to communicate' [...] just allow your imagination to open that door where maybe you will perceive something.

Magliocco shows that a "certain amount of acting 'as if'" (as though paper money contains the value of our day's work; as though death might not strike tomorrow) is in fact requisite for everyday functioning on a basic (individual or social) level. This acting 'as if' or acting as though amplifies the being of those things with which we're interacting, reiterating them on another plane of actuality. The boundaries of the space are expanded beyond our own thoughts to one of worldly interaction. Within the context of EuroWestern rationalist human exceptionalism, acting as though we can interact with plants as communicative allows us to follow these possibilities; to let them unravel, unfettered not only from one's prior judgements but also the bounds of those culturally determined thought frameworks that

³ A concept that she takes up from psychologist Tony Bates.

underlie them, and see where they take us. Suspending disbelief opens the door to the pathway, and acting as though is our feet carrying us, perhaps despite ourselves, headlong down it. This is a very different kind of response. It disregards the constraints of mind-body dualism and objective knowledge and instead acknowledges the world as storied. The story is given an ontological and epistemological weighting, as something integral to the way that we exist within and relate to the world. And our creative powers of storying are (acknowledged) and emphasised as a mode of participatory worldmaking. That is, we take a part in the stories that we uphold and inhabit.

This is a matter of responsibility. Care must be taken. Val Plumwood offers a critique of 'acting as though' as she discovers it within the analytic philosophy of Daniel Dennett and John Searle whilst herself making the case for an 'intentional stance' towards the living world; that is, the recognition of non-human intentionality, our willingness and ability for which, she contends, "reveals much about our own ability to develop ethical relationships". She discovers an insidious parallel in their argument that "the non-human world should be treated as if it had properties it does not 'really' have as part of a 'strategy' for prediction and control" which she finds to perform "a curious double-think" that ultimately reinscribes human supremacism:

[...] In the Dennett–Searle 'as if' methodology, what is given with one hand is taken away with the other: this advantage is offset by a negative feature, for this liberation of recognition is only possible because it is accompanied by a refusal to take intentionality seriously in ethical terms and by the insertion of Dennett's version of 'the intentional stance' into an essentially monological ethical framework based on human supremacism and minimising non-human intentional recognition in the interests of maximising the human share of the world. This means that rather than being a strategy for meeting the other, the 'pseudo-recognition' of the other as an 'as if' intentional being it permits becomes instead a strategy for domination in the form of prediction and control [...] and other possibilities for a richer

relationship are neglected.⁴

This critique is important, and echoes Cromer's wariness of a cynicism in temporarily ignoring those conceptual frameworks to which we retain a firm allegiance; the strategism which "insists on keeping a foothold still in the old reductive rationality" that maintains its own story as that of objective reality. Plumwood's quest is for the dismantling of this old schema; replacing the "dominant rationalist forms of rationality" with "ecologically sensitive ones that judge what currently passes for reason by the standards of ecological success or failure, among other things".⁵ This project, similarly (whilst less concerned with the rescue of reason), explores the constructive power of a poetic approach to remake reality by virtue of the creative relationship; the tools of suspending disbelief and acting as though help us to enter into this liminal space of intentional collaborative storying; a space of mythopoiesis. The recuperation of Dennett and Searle is premised upon a denial of such schematic pluralism in the first place; of the story of Reason as one (politically motivated) possibility amongst others. Their "refusal to take intentionality seriously" is matched by a refusal to take seriously the world-constructive powers of story, and storying; let alone to recognise their own stories - the story of Rational Reason (the preserve of the white male Human) - as such. As Plumwood writes:

The fear of abandoning the terrain of reductionism and human supremacism that is lodged so deep in the traditions and identity of science lies behind Dennett's strange vacillation on the meaning of the intentional stance, and his insistence that any movement beyond the everyday Cartesian conviction that only humans have minds has to be rigorously 'proved'.

But you don't 'prove' a stance, you choose to adopt it!⁶

The tools of suspending disbelief and acting as though remain cynical when

⁴ *Environmental Culture*, p. 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184. Sue Evans finds an argument for 'as if' thinking grounded in this kind of ethical pragmatism within herbal practice in Georges Canguilhem's contention that vitalism can be understood "as a moral position rather than a scientific fact" and as such "does not need to be proven, but, as a morality, can be chosen". She continues: "[h]e suggests that treating 'as if' vital force exists leads to clinical thinking which promotes therapeutic conservatism, because intervention is understood as a method by which the vital force and *vis mediatrix naturae* [the healing power of nature] can be supported". (Evans, p. 2101.)

deployed within the constrictive framework of Western metaphysical reality, with its doctrines of fact and proof, and its consignment of the poetic to the neutralising confines of the culturally permitted 'literary' sphere. It gains radical force when turned back onto the world as a tool of creative connection with those categorically excluded by the dominant story and a form of empowered control over and choice in the stories that we inhabit.

Within plantwork, acting as though is useful as a tool of intentional reality-building because it helps plantworkers to shift schemas in this way, interacting with realities (or non-realities, or things in between - the distinction is eased) that it might otherwise be difficult to admit within our ordinary conceptual or perceptual schemas. Through this pathway, one can pass over obstacles of judgement or scepticism to connect through interaction. Belief loses its hold; we enter a space of play. It takes advantage of the imagining and visioning that is the first step in making real, and in associating an action with the image, it creates a first level of concretisation. Having acted, despite whatever inhibitions, a platform is thereby created upon which one can creatively build.⁷ This action-event can then interact with other elements of shared or collectively held realities. What if, despite the Western cultural consensus that tells us that plants are unfeeling and unthinking, are objects and resources not worthy of moral consideration; what if, even if this conceptual framework has seeped deeply into our own thoughts and language and habits, we acted as though plants were precious, and ensouled, and had their own meanings and purposes and desires and aspirations, and stories to tell and wisdom from which to learn, and gifts to give if they so chose (but perhaps sometimes they

⁷ In this it might be noted that acting as though can complement ordinary envisioning imagining without the suspension of disbelief too. Cristina Cromer gives an account in which a person's dry brittle hair indicates chronic dehydration and she insists that she doesn't need water because she isn't thirsty. In response, Cromer helps her to imagine her condition from her body's point of view: "I told her a story about how her body doesn't know what her brain knows. Her body only knows that it's living in a desert. Her body doesn't know that she's living in the city with running water [...] so it's down-regulated its desire for water; its down-regulated it's asking for water. And she said "that makes sense"". The story enables the woman to act according to an imagined (and in fact more accurate) reality in which her body requires water that 'makes sense' to her. In drinking more water, she also feeds this imagined reality - the story of her body as dehydrated - reifying its truth at the same time as transforming it.

don't, and we understood that to be their prerogative as for-themselves living things)? What if these ways of acting, by virtue of their persistent repetition, began to be reiterated within cultural habits, such that interacting with plants as meaningful self-willed beings were not a strange thing to do. Perhaps they might then find their way into social norms or policy; perhaps roads might be built around ancient woodland rather than on top of it (a concession famously granted a Hawthorn locally associated with fairies in County Clare in Ireland)⁸ or laws might be reconceived to take into account plant rights (a question on which the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology offered guidelines in their report *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants: Moral Consideration of Plants For Their Own Sake*),⁹ constituting an inscription of these habits into socially-determined material reality.

Within a framework of poetic approach, it is possible to take creative charge of this vulnerability of 'objective reality' to the commingling tendencies of those things that it excludes as fictions by acting as though they are real and thus contribute a reifying layer to their existence. And, as with reading a book, as with a vision, in interacting with images or fictions (things of hazy ontological status), we ourselves retain a foot in our other habitual worlds (thought-frameworks, selves), making a bridge between them. And through the concretisation that affirmation/acting brings, we create something enduring, or recallable. We can venture a little into these worlds and bring something back. That we can do this - interact with phenomena of varying shades of ontological solidity in a way that makes them more real and allows them to impact upon the material - is because fictions and imaginings are already possessive of a degree of reality of their own, and once we

⁸ Gordon Deegan, 'Fairy Bush Survives the Motorway Planners', *Irish Times* (May 29, 1999) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/fairy-bush-survives-the-motorway-planners-1.190053>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

⁹ Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology ECNH, *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants: Moral Consideration of Plants For Their Own Sake*, ed. by Ariane Willemsen, trans. by Jackie Leach Scully [Swiss Governmental Committee Report] (2008) <<http://w.astro.berkeley.edu/~kalas/ethics/documents/environment/e-Broschure-Wurde-Pflanze-2008.pdf>> [accessed 20 Mar 2021].

can get past the forbidding lines of rational justification of belief and material positivism, we can amplify these glimmers of realness. What's more, the actions that we manifest give a platform for recognition and affirmation from others. Other people can collaborate with this story and lend it a greater reality and truth (this is the way that cultural meta-narratives come into being and, too, traditionally, myth).

Our conceptual language is actually very well suited to 'as if's (and 'what if's), because, as Kohn points out, symbolic language is able to "retain referential stability even in the absence of their objects of reference" on account of words gaining their meaning via an established system of linguistic convention (from their relationship to each other rather than to the world), such that, within symbolic language, "reference acquires a veritable freedom".¹⁰ Thus our language easily helps us to imagine realities that are immaterial; are not there directly before us - it is for this reason that we are so well acquainted with fiction and artifice.¹¹ From our highly stable and symbolic language, whole other worlds can be created, that can endure captured in description, that we can become absorbed in, as with the daydreams of our thought. Deploying the 'as if' as a tool for action echoes the process of 'emergent reals', of which our abstract language is one. Our actions create patterns, upon the foundation of which new levels of reality can emerge. Kohn identifies this process as, in fact, fundamental to the operations of life:

Life forms, as they represent and amplify the habits of the world, create new habits, and their interactions with other organisms create even more habits. Life, then, proliferates habits.¹²

We see then, that 'acting as though', as a mode of imaginative interaction with phenomena of all shades of ontological 'realness' is in keeping with ecological logics. It is a tool of conscious, intentional reality-creation at a fundamental level

¹⁰ Kohn, p. 55.

¹¹ For Kohn, our highly symbolic language is exceptionally adept at 'constructing worlds', but the capacity to represent and thereby 'guess' at an absent future is inherent in the semiotic processes that are characteristic of all life.

¹² Ibid., p. 62.

that echoes the dynamics of the vaster living world.

5.2 Focus and Amplification

Selectivity and Amplification in Plantwork

Habits of selectivity, focus and amplification are a corollary of life as ecologically structured. Amidst the ceaseless circulation of informational and affective flows, it is necessary that perceptions and sense-data be controlled via a filter of relevance. Aspects of experience - of the world and its affects - are selectively uptaken and attributed significance relative to a thing (a plant, a person)'s own being, or more importantly, its own becoming; the creation of pathways of sense within the maelstrom of infinite possibility. The ubiquity of this process of sense-making via selective significance relative to an intended becoming is described by Kohn, for whom it constitutes the independent meaningfulness of the world:

The world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans. Rather, mean-ings - means-ends relations, strivings, purposes, telos, intentions, functions and significance - emerge in a world of living thoughts beyond the human in ways that are not fully exhausted by our all-too-human attempts to define and control these.¹³

Kohn's hyphenation of 'mean-ing' is intended to emphasise the way that meanings are determined relative to the ends that he understands as intrinsic to all life (i.e. their proximity to 'means'). We can also read in the purposive intentionality of mean-ings (as determined by ends) - their 'towardsness', or in Kohn's words "aboutness" - an inherent dynamism that allows us to also read this word as a verb; things mean towards their ends (and this mean-ing towards ends creates/constitutes meaning). Thus meaning is a relation of becoming; the directional purposiveness of

¹³ Kohn, p. 72.

those relational dynamics by which life operates. The dual meaning of the word 'matter' also emphasises the 'in-the-worldness' of meaning. Beings take up those elements of the world around them that matter to them (relative to their ends - the having of which necessarily involves a projective element), and integrate them into their own unfolding realities. Focus and amplification, as part of the mechanism of response, are thus an integral part of the processes of life.

American herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner considers the way that habits of selection occur to a large extent as a function of physiology in tandem with learned behaviours. For Buhner, all living organisms possess the capacity to control their sensory inflow via a system of 'gating', which in human beings is supported by the function of our sense organs in tandem with neural activity. He writes:

Sensory gating channels can be thought of as tiny apertures or gates or doors in specific sections of the nervous system's neural network. They are similar to the lens in our eyes [...] that can expand or contract as needed to increase or decrease the amount of data allowed in. They act to prevent sensory overload. In other words, if we consciously perceived everything that was coming in simultaneously as it was happening we would be overwhelmed with sensory experience. [...] For it is true that, if gating did not exist, if the nearly infinite amount of sensory expressions that exist in the world flowed in without restraint every minute of every day of our lives, we simply could not function - we would experience what many researchers refer to as cognitive fragmentation. We would drown in a sea of sensory inputs.¹⁴

For the most part then, sensory gating is an automatic function of our bodies and brains, as "[t]he pre-attentional parts of the self use a complicated analytic process to determine relevance", effectively making decisions for us with regard to what reaches our consciousness. But how are these decisions made? What is our bodies' criteria for determining what is and isn't relevant to us? In fact, the influences span the spectrum of our evolutionary development as a species to whether or not we're

¹⁴ *Imaginal*, pp. 32-3.

running late. Between the two is all the “experience, schooling, and cultural habituation” that influences our values.¹⁵ That which we are even aware of, at any given moment, is the result of a vast playing field of influences, over which we have varying degrees of control. It is for this reason that an explanation of ‘plant blindness’ as arising from our evolutionary physiology falls short,¹⁶ and the consideration of ingrained cultural and philosophical factors is far more pertinent.¹⁷ That is, it is because plants do not matter to us, as independently mean-ingful living beings, that we only perceive them as background.

It is also more pertinent because this is something we can do something about. This backgrounding of and obliviousness to plants within the Western philosophical and cultural traditions is a problem of human making, and something that we can work to rectify. As it is ingrained within us as a culturally determined habit, rooted in culturally determined ideological value systems, we can work to undo this. But habits - especially invisibilised culturally supported ones - are not easy to undo, and as Buhner reminds us, this kind of reprogramming requires determination, discipline and skill (“you, your conscious self, can override that decision... if you want to, that is”).¹⁸ The idea is that through a disciplined practice of selective focus, amongst other techniques, we can begin to gain some control over those unconscious habits of focus and amplification that are inscribed within the functioning of our neural networks and which invisibly structure our experience and interactions.¹⁹ Again, this effort takes place at an intersection of meaning and materiality, as we attempt to teach our own bodies to reorient their perceptual attentions towards those elements of the world that we decide matter to us. In the case of plant sensitivity,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁶ Wandersee and Schussler, p. 83.

¹⁷ Hall, *Plants as Persons* (p. 6); Gagliano et al., *Language* (p. viii).

¹⁸ *Imaginal*, p. 92

¹⁹ This understanding resonates with politicised concepts such as ‘deschooling’ (broadly) and ‘decolonisation’ (as regards the internalisation of the logics of white supremacy), echoing parallels drawn by both Nathaniel Hughes and Nikki Darrell between the processes of coming into ecological relationship and those of decolonising the self (Hughes articulates it in terms of “a responsibility to gradually learn about our own violence and the way in which we inflict it”).

that involves developing “the feeling sense” or “heart field perception”.²⁰ In this injunction, ‘heart’ serves a metaphorical and symbolic function as that which governs the field of feeling and empathic attunement, but we also understand that this is not merely metaphor, but also offers this ‘feeling sense’ a physical location in the body; the heart as organ is not merely that which pumps blood, but also plays a role in our capacity to feel, and to feel well; both in terms of our intuitive skills and also as regards things mattering to us.

To engage a selective focus means that we orient our attentions upon a consciously chosen element of our in-the-moment reality. We highlight for ourselves a small element of our sensory experience by choosing to consciously filter out those other elements of sensory input that would function as distractions - this is the sort of focus that a meditative or contemplative being-towards allows. From that which passes through our sensory gating channels, we choose what to ‘feed’. This process is always already occurrent within all of our engagements, and is a fundamental way that the agendas of the perceiving/investigating/interpretative subject influences the outcomes of investigation. However, it is not always conscious, or chosen, or disciplined, and within any kind of approach which operates from a starting-position of transcendent subjects or objective researchers, it is not acknowledged. As with acting as though, in ‘saying yes to’ and amplifying particular elements, we contribute to creating a (subjective, bounded, relational) base layer of reality that can then be built upon in various ways. Elements of our in-the-moment experience can be put into play with other elements; of present reality, of our own knowledge and histories, of our creative inclinations, of the thoughts and experiences of others (similarly to how we might generate a particular reading of a poem).

This understanding of how our conscious thoughts, and the actions and behaviours

²⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

that they give rise to, are emergent from other pre-conscious functions of habit is reflected in holistic herbalist practices that consider lifestyle and beliefs - particularly those implicated in one's self-narrative - as pathways to addressing embodied illness.²¹ Kohn illustrates how these processes of emergence from habit to thought are, again, not the sole province of human thinking, but characteristic of the thinking that all life does (indeed, that constitutes, on this account, what life is). For Kohn, amplification is an inevitable consequence of habits and interactions. Habits, and the behaviours that accompany them, re-present existent forms and patterns in a way that lend them additional reality through reiteration. He illustrates this with an observation of the way that the patterns of distribution of trees bearing fruit at any given time across the Ávila forest is amplified through a chain of interspecies interactions, each of which translates and re-presents this pattern on a new level:

This means that at any given time there will exist a different geometrical constellation of fruiting resources that attracts animals. Fruit-eating animals amplify this constellation's pattern. For they are not only attracted to fruiting trees but often also to the increased safety provided by foraging in a multispecies association [...] That predators, in turn, are attracted to this concentration of animals further amplifies the pattern of distribution of life across the forest landscape. This results in a particular pattern of potential game meat: a clustered, shifting, highly ephemeral and localized concentration of animals interspersed by vast areas of relative emptiness. Ávila hunters, then, don't hunt animals directly. Rather, they seek to discover and harness the ephemeral form created by the particular spatial distribution or configuration of those tree species that are fruiting at any given point in time because this is what attracts animals.

Successful Ávila hunters are attuned to the fruiting patterns of trees of the forest, having cultivated this perceptive sensitivity, on account of this being a thing that matters to their purposes. This is a set of communications typically between trees

²¹ Ayo Wahlberg cites Coward in recognising this approach as determinative of the popular conception of 'alternative' healthcare: "[f]or many, the notion of alternative is considerably more than just doing it differently from orthodox medicine. It also a symbolic activity. It is a profound expression of a new consciousness which individuals have about health and body... involv[ing] a commitment to finding a new life style, to pursuing well-being... [and] a new consciousness of the importance of the individual in achieving health" (Coward 1989: 11)" (Wahlberg, 'Revival', p. 26). (All grammatical changes in original.)

and the animals that help them to distribute their seeds. Bearing fruit is a fundamental representation of the trees' reproductive needs, which configuration as a geographical pattern through their translation into animal eating behaviours (into hunter movements through the forest; into, historically, the movements of other hunters from hostile tribes who seek to capture them for pay) constitute increasing layers of abstraction and of amplification. This, for Kohn, is how forests think.

Amplification is a result of the baseline endless variety and multiplicity of the world - a way that the world makes sense. It creates patterns and pathways, building bridges between different levels, or orders, or flows of reality, creating platforms for the emergence of new layers; it is a development of the potentialities contained within a particularity... the unfurling of a strand of reality. It picks up on a thing and runs with it, morphing and changing shape across boundaries of difference, unfolding across multiple new iterations, perhaps creating branches of connection as it allows elements to interact in new ways. Sometimes amplification occurs as the result of selves and their choices, and sometimes it is a hidden function of the ecological interactivity of the world. Wherever we can chart it, we can see that it is storytelling; it tells stories of certain relations and engagements, and what is important and meaningful within them, feeding these particular realities, holding them open and making them more and more real. Where these stories remain open, they feed the intricacy and diversity of the world.

These stories, however, are not always retained; across a series of transmutations and translations, phenomena often lose track of their own pathways of emergence. This is characteristic of entanglements with the abstractions of capitalist economics and language. Tsing shows one of these pathways in the amplification of value in the journey of Matsuke mushrooms to market. The mushroom's singularity; the particularities of its growth - perhaps it has taken on the scent of the trees that it grew together with, or have a particular colour

and shape - are both amplified and erased in the the narratives of the foragers, who regard them as 'trophies of the hunt' (even as they sell them for the highest price) and symbolic of their own freedom, and in their monetary valuation. At this point, they still bear something of their own story, but as they continue along their journey of commodification, their singularity diminishes. By the time they have made their journey of export across the sea, it has disappeared entirely. At this point: "[t]hey are as close as we might get to alienated, stand-alone objects: labeled only by the country of the exporter, no one could have any idea under what conditions they were foraged or sold. They have no connections to the people who earlier admired and exchanged them. They are inventory: assets from which importers build their firms".²² With their entry into the market, the mushrooms have lost all constitutive particularity, their being determined instead by virtue of acquired abstractions.

These kinds of transformations and identity shiftings are in some ways an inevitably corollary of amplification as a process of selective focus. All amplification, as it crosses borders of translation, involves a corresponding obscuring, or even erasure, of other elements of singularity. However, the logics of capitalist economics, as with those of language (unlike ecological tending towards diversity and complexity) tend to privilege those elements that are generalisable; they follow the logics of substitutability that allow one thing to stand in for another. Tsing articulates this proclivity of capitalism for the standardisable and the interchangeable in the concept of 'scaleability' ("the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames"); not, she notes, "an ordinary feature of nature".²³ This amplification only of those elements of things that are interchangeable reduces particularity - "banishes meaningful diversity" - which is to say that the scale-oriented amplifications of capitalist economics (like our conventionalised language logics) are, in fact, predominantly reductive. They reduce things in their complexity

²² *Mushroom*, p. 123.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 38.

and singularity and situatedness, to alienated commodity or abstract code. Tsing cautions against a simplistic attribution of bad-good value judgements to the scaleable and non-scaleable respectively: the main difference, she writes, is that “the latter are more diverse because they are not geared up for expansion”.²⁴ However, underlying EuroWestern culture, the predilections of capitalist and linguistic logics towards scaleability have, of course, seeped into our cultural habits, including (as Tsing also notes) those of our methodological approaches.²⁵

Capitalism commodifies, and language codifies, but this is not the end of the story. Tsing’s Matsuke story does not end with equivalised mushrooms in crates of cargo, “but almost immediately on arrival, they begin their transformation from commodities to gifts”. The reconfiguration of Matsuke back into singular gifts has to do with its new meaning as a symbol of intention within human relationship; “[i]ndividuals who buy matsutake are almost always thinking about building relationships. [...] Matsuke signals a serious commitment”. For Tsing, this restoration of singularity as gift has no relation to their stories of origin, the colourful exchanges of foragers and buyers, “much less ecological life-worlds”. This is “one set of relations that is never included with matsutake gifts in Japan”.²⁶ We could think of many other examples where these relations do count and traces of singularity are weirdly recoverable in the commodity as stories of origin and process of production; fair trade for example, or ‘artesanal’ items (although it is arguable, however, the extent to which these are traces of original singularity, or stories - which may or may not accord with reality - reattached to the object, acting as a platform for additional

²⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁵ “The ability to make one’s research framework apply to greater scales, without changing the research questions, has become a hallmark of modern knowledge” (ibid., p. 38). Interestingly, Laura Pustarfi also notes “problems of time and scale” as a critical obstacle in phenomenological approaches to plants (namely trees), noting that “[s]taccato hours or days marked on a calendar seem insufficient for the phenomenological method with such a massive and seemingly immobile entity” (Laura Pustarfi, ‘Arboreality: Revisioning Trees in the Western Paradigm’, doctoral dissertation, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2019 (p. 59)). To engage with plants on their own terms then means disengaging from that scaleable time that constructs our experience.

²⁶ *Mushroom*, pp. 123, 125, 126.

value-creation).²⁷ Matsuke economics engages something of the resistance of living dynamics to these kinds of scaleable reductions; the way that relationship and heterogeneity continue to proliferate in the margins and the between spaces, enabling and reappropriating these within the bounds of the market/poem. Thus Tsing emphasises the ongoing, interactive play of scalability and irreducibility - the dynamics of reduction, regrowth and recapture. This understanding is illuminative for our thinking about the interplay of the abstract and the ecological; our thought and language paradigms and the plant being that wildly exceeds them. The dynamics of resistance here are less one of opposition than of opportunity; a subversive, disruptive reclamation of space. In the way that weeds pervade urban space. A growing through. Likewise, thought, language, and research can in turn be put into the service of ecological excess and diversity, creating space for such reclamations and making themselves porous. This is a poetic gesture. For Kohn, amplification as a methodological tool offers this kind of space-creation within and through research:

As we learn to attend ethnographically to that which lies beyond the human, certain strange phenomena suddenly come to the fore, and these strange phenomena amplify, and in the process come to exemplify, some of the general properties of the world in which we live. If through this form of analysis we can find ways to further amplify these phenomena, we can then cultivate them as concepts and mobilize them as tools. By methodologically privileging amplification over, say, comparison or reduction we can create a somewhat different anthropology, one that can help us understand how we might better live in a world we share with other kinds of lives.²⁸

²⁷ Referencing Tsing and Kohn, David Farrier discovers this dynamic of resurgent excess in the 'plantation poetry' of Peter Larkin, where blocks of justified text - "the hard edges and regular spaces of regimented lines" - invoke plantation logics of scalability, and yet this logic "leads, conversely, to a new understanding of relation" as the poetic makes visible the micro-interactions within the text, disrupting its monoculture-like homogeneity. "The effect" he observes, "is of a kind of coppiced verse, in which interrupting or cutting back the pathway of linear sense-making in the poetic phrase or line stimulates the growth of other possible kinds of sense, new shoots that branch off in other directions". This rediscovery and restimulation of relationship and unruly growth that Farrier finds within Larkin's plantation poems encapsulates the way that the poetic elicits the singular and the sensual from codifying language. (David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones and Extinction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 58-9.)

²⁸ Kohn, p. 22.

Thus amplification as a methodological tool helps make space for the proliferative emergence of qualities subdued or squashed out by other approaches.

Amplifying Plants as Medicines: Responsivity

For herbalists, whose role involves facilitating wellness by matching plants to people, habits of focus and selection in engagement with plants are most often oriented towards an end of treatment; the reiteration of the plant (in its for-itself being) as a medicine (in relation). In Shaw and Hedley's method of organoleptic assessment, the final question "what sort of person might benefit from this herb?" encourages students - having quietly listened to and observed the diverse ways that the plant expresses itself within the interaction - to start translating observations into an understanding of the herbs' potential medicinal virtues. We might notice the upholding of both plants and people as 'complex wholes' in this conception; although of course, thinking about the answer may well lead onto the grounding knowledge-frameworks of plant constituents and actions, energetics and so forth. Typically, a plant will be chosen as a medicine in emphasis or appreciation of particular actions or attributes, and these qualities will be amplified in the mode of preparation and prescription. Medicine making then, is a process of selection and focus by which certain elements of a plant's character - its virtues - are amplified, to later re-articulate themselves in the context of their interaction with the patient.

It is worth reflecting here a moment on the ways that herbalists do, in relating to plants as medicines, contribute towards the construction of plant identities, drawing boundaries of demarcation. The most common boundary line follows that of species differentiation: Ladies Mantle, Japanese Knotweed, Dandelion. There are, in fact,

around 250 subspecies of Dandelion (*Taraxacum Officinale*) in Britain and Ireland,²⁹ but all of them offer a reliably identifiable set of herbal actions and constituents that allow them to be listed, in herbals, as 'Dandelion'. Beyond that, a particular part of a plant might be favoured for usage: as regards Dandelion (all of which parts are medicinal), the leaf has a particular affinity with the kidneys and the root with the liver; whilst it is always the bulb of the (cultivated) Garlic that is used, and Raspberry Leaf and Cramp Bark are named as such. Biodynamics and Magical or Astrological herbalism may give weight to the place and time of harvest of the medicine (and 'flower essences' are typically made over a duration of time determined by the sun or moon). Differentiation within plant species is acknowledged ("they have a species character and then they have their individual character as well; so each individual Wood Betony plant has got its own individual personality as well" says Nikki Darrell). And a herbalist may have favourite plants that are related to as 'individuals'; certain trees especially (Hawthorn and Blackthorn, for instance) are frequently accorded individual significance according to cultural custom. However, for the most part, plants will be considered and referred to in species terms. This construction and amplification of plant 'identities' could be understood then to involve an element of arbitrariness; plant being tends to transgress the conceptual lines that we're used to drawing, exploding metaphysical concepts of identity (as Michael Marder stresses). However, they facilitate the kinds of relationships that herbalists create with plants (which relationships may of course be deepened and particularised) and as such function as doorways for knowledge and relationship - which is to say that these lines are drawn along lines of herbalists' meaning. And yet, as herbalists' meanings are largely structured around facilitating plant function, we might also surmise that these boundaries reflect something of the plants' (multiple and dynamic) identities that are proper to them. The construction

²⁹ Anonymous, *Dandelions*, Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland <<https://bsbi.org/identification/taraxacum>> [accessed 17 Sept 2020]. Of course, it's worth remembering here that botanical taxonomy follows its own set of internal logics, and plant classifications sometimes change over time.

and amplification of species identity in this way also facilitates the herbalist regard for plants as 'complex wholes' (which conception rejects the pharmacological isolation of 'active' constituents and carries a holistic understanding of plants as ecologically entangled) and enable the collective holding of a culture and a knowledge set in common.

This kind of categorising - the grouping together of like things - Kohn identifies as integral to what it is to think. It is 'a kind of forgetting' that frees thought from the overwhelming impossibility of accounting for infinite particularity. And this 'forgetting' constitutes a 'productive confusion' that, in failing to differentiate between those aspects of particularity that are not relevant to the ends at hand (are not meaningful) produces 'kinds' - or in semiotic terms 'generals' - which constructions may also constitute something 'real' about the world; that the general kind of 'Dandelion' exists for herbalists (and other humans, and perhaps other beings) affects the relationship that Dandelions have with herbalists. Moreover, as thought, for Kohn, is not confined to humans but is characteristic of life itself, the 'productive confusion' of creating kinds is not constricted to human categorisations. To translate the point, for those plants that are 'camp followers'³⁰ - Nettle, Cannabis, Plantain - and that thrive in the midst of human settlement, the 'kind' that is 'people' is relevant. Perhaps for some plants the 'kind' that is 'herbalists' - those that offer them loving attention; that cultivate and that harvest them, perhaps that communicate with them and make efforts to understand them and amplify their being - is a more relevant differentiation than that which would distinguish 'humans' from other indifferent warm-blooded creatures. Which is to say again that these categorisations serve relationship (namely, herbalist-plant relationships). For Kohn, the kinds of participatory relationship that occurs between plants and herbalists, by which herbalists make effort to understand and rearticulate a plant's character, is an

³⁰ I take this term from the poetic-botanic writing of Dale Pendell.

interaction between 'selves'. Selfhood is conceived as a function of (semiotic) relationship rather than anything metaphysical:

[S]elfhood is not limited just to animals with brains. Plants are also selves. Nor is it coterminous with a physically bounded organism [...], selfhood can be distributed over bodies [...] or it can be one of many other selves within a body".³¹

In Kohn's language, Dandelion is a 'self' and Japanese Knotweed is a 'self' (as would be 'individual' Dandelion and Knotweed plants); and it is this that allows for herbalists to interact with them on ecological terms. It is because they are 'selves' with perspectives and preferences and meanings that herbalists can strive to communicate with them and understand them (and learn from and collaborate with) them. These 'selves' - herbalists and the plants that they work with - are complex (multiple, open) 'wholes', which 'wholeness' precedes any possible descriptions in terms of 'parts'.³² Within the context of herbalist-plant relationships, plants as complex 'wholes' - or 'selves' - in species terms precede plants as 'parts' - their pharmacological make up (which information is nonetheless extremely useful) - and, most of the time, as individual specimens.

The characteristic 'wholeness' of a plant is understood, within herbalism, as integral to its medicine. Nikki Darrell repeats a comment made by one of her students, remarking upon its import:

The plant works to heal not by treating a particular symptom, or symptom set, but by feeding in meanings that align the person to the essential character of the plant.³³

This insight is significant in its implications. It recognises that the power of the plant to heal is a function of its 'for-itself' being; as a self-determining, purposive living thing that is meaning towards its own ends. In Kohn's terms, it is the 'aboutness' of

³¹ Kohn, p. 75.

³² Ibid., p. 64.

³³ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 60.

the plant that constitutes what Nikki Darrell and her student recognise as its 'core medicine'; a herbalist might be more likely to articulate it in terms of its 'character' or 'personality'. Healing occurs when the meanings of a plant finds resonance - re-express themselves - within the being (whether physical or otherwise) of the recipient of the medicine. This understanding resonates with Nathaniel Hughes' conception of the healing process:³⁴

The plant just speaks to us as a whole. You know so say, for instance, you work with a plant and you have a really strong response with your gut. I'm not sure it's because that plant is focused on the gut. I think it's because you are not. I think that plant is meeting on hundreds of levels and the fact that you experience it in your gut is not showing something about the plant; it's showing something about your need. So the plants that resonate for people are the plants that are going to bridge to them at this moment. You could say the optimistic soul is always looking how to grow. And our job is just simply to see what door is just about ready to open. And that's all we do, is just look for the door that's ready to open.

The art of the herbalist then is one of facilitation. The herbalist's role is to facilitate this productive amplification of the plant's healing virtues within the appropriate context of the patient whose state of being (sick; or out of balance in some way) will benefit from the collaboration.

This art of facilitating wellness by amplifying plants' for-themselves meanings as medicinal virtues, by enabling their re-expression within an accordant context of patient-sickness is, of course, a process - and one that is thoroughly relational at every stage. Choosing a plant as a medicine is part of the response element of this process (of facilitation of wellness) and the way that a plant is chosen and prepared affects the way that it will re-express itself in interaction with the patient:

The way in which a medicine is prepared from a plant will have an effect on the way it

³⁴ Although he eschews the language of 'meaning' on account of its connotations of cerebral functioning, preferring to work himself with the concepts of 'potencies' and 'gnosis' - "a profound sense of knowing or understanding that is felt through the whole body".

expresses itself (in part due to the actual constituents, the matter that is extracted and also due to the interactions that occur during the preparation process). The overall meaning and medicine of the plant, for example *Avena* (oats), will be there but maybe certain aspects of its personality will come through more strongly, depending on the way it is prepared, who is giving the medicine, and who is receiving it.³⁵

A part of the skill - the art perhaps - of the practitioner then, involves perceiving (by means of knowledgeable acquaintance and attunement) and amplifying (by means of preparation and prescription) the most appropriate meanings of a plant, in the most optimal ways.

There are many enchanting examples of amplificatory poetic practices in medicine-making; 'poetic' in an ordinary-language usage of the word, and also in the philosophical sense of an attentive co-creating that illuminates things in their 'essence'. Which 'essence' we might now read not as some irreducible philosophical singularity, but in terms of those very worldly 'meanings' that are intrinsic to and characteristic of the plants as purposive, striving, agential beings - the 'aboutness' of a herb (most likely in species terms) as understood by the herbalist.³⁶ It's a common practice, for example, to pick the leaves and flowers of St. John's Wort - a plant now famous for its anti-depressant virtues - in full sunshine, and to macerate it in oil 'on a sunny windowsill', until the tiny glands that give it its Latin name of *Hypericum perforatum* secrete their contents into the substrate, turning the whole thing, rather magically (for the leaves are green, and the flowers yellow), a deep red colour. Carole Guyett chooses golden tequila as a tincture substrate to amplify this sunny element. Cristina Cromer's method of deep decoction involves slow-cooking the mixture without ever letting it come to boil over the course of many hours, stirring and 'tending' to it 'mindfully', which preparation she names *Decocta*

³⁵ Darell, *Conversations*, p. 59.

³⁶ This re-conception of 'essence' in terms of mean-ing/'aboutness' eases Marder's concerns about the false (anthropocentric) positing of plant 'interiorities'.

Profunda, in keeping with the convention of Latin names for prescriptions, “because there's something very profound going on”. She discovered through practice that sometimes these decoctions would naturally ferment after some time (attracting airborne yeasts from the environment), and invited her patients to continue taking them in their fermented form if they so chose, and found that sometimes this would coincide with a shift in the healing process. Characteristic of herbalism as a whole (in contrast to a biomedical approach) is the use of whole plant extracts, retaining a more complete biochemical - and vital energetic - profile; the amplification rather than isolation of constituents. Or, perhaps we could say responsive rather than reductionist amplifications; amplification as a caring response to complexity.

Nathaniel Hughes reiterates the responsibility that the practitioner holds towards the plant as living being in the process of translating it into medicine form:

It's a bridge, it's a doorway. And I'd say the best medicine is the best bridge. And it is a really active process for me and, if anything, I've wound back my medicine-making because of a desire to do it well. And how difficult that really is. How to really honour the plant, how to really honour the individual? What would it be that this bridging is a deeply intentional act that is full of our care, regard, gratitude? I think I'm in a process with that myself.³⁷

His conception emphasises the role of the practitioner as implicated facilitator. Medicine-making is conceived as an act of honouring of the plant in its wholeness. This deeply intentional, care-ful crafting accords with the idea of *poiesis* as a collaborative remaking of the world that elicits its singularity: the plant is brought to ‘shine forth’³⁸ through its translation into a remedy. Trust in the plant is foregrounded. Nikki Darrell writes that, from a place of intimate acquaintance, having acquired, through assiduous attentiveness “a whole feeling of the plant’s

³⁷ He follows this statement with an acknowledgement of the potential efficacy of pre-formulated remedies: “but I also acknowledge that when I started teaching it was all using dried herbs and tinctures. [...] I wasn't ready to relate to plants as living beings at that point, and people had amazing experiences through those tinctures and teas”.

³⁸ To borrow a phrase from Heidegger.

persona”, that “from there we can understand that the appropriate part of the plant will feed into a person when that medicine is needed”.³⁹ Again, this trust emphasises a regard of the plant’s wholeness and autonomy, facilitating amplifications that preserve the integrity of its complexity. It contrasts starkly with the pharmacological isolation of ‘active constituents’, which, as Matthew Wood notes, carries the implication that “the rest of the plant [is] inactive or less active”.⁴⁰ Herbalist medicine making, as an articulation of plants and their meanings as autonomous complex wholes, is a poetic act in the phenomenological sense, as a bringing to light of the being of things. Listening to plants in such a way as to hear them ‘speak to us as a whole’ is akin to an engagement with poetic works, where “we read to find out what is in it and try to do so in such a way that it comes forth”⁴¹, realising something of their truth through an absorbed receptive attention. However, herbalist articulations of plants as medicines transgresses the phenomenological conception of the poetic as something peculiar to human dwelling in language, to enact a more expansive kind of poetic being in the world that understands plants as already self-expressive (but whose ‘saying of being’ happens in more ways than just words).⁴²

The habitual cultural uses of a plant also change the ways that a plant is amplified and is therefore encountered - and therefore its meanings-in-relation - within a culture or cultural epoch. For example, Hawthorn in contemporary WHM is famous as a heart medicine and a firm staple of the *Materia Medica*, but was not widely used as a remedy before the end of the nineteenth century with only a short paragraph in Culpeper (as a diuretic and litholitic).⁴³ In Traditional Chinese

³⁹ *Conversations*, p.12.

⁴⁰ Wood, (n.p.).

⁴¹ Gadamer, ‘Artwork’, p. 221.

⁴² Note too, in herbalist medicine-making, that there is no opposition of artistry and functionality as in phenomenological conceptions of the poetic; it is, rather, another kind of “practical application in the sacred ordinary” (Darrell).

⁴³ Christopher Hedley, ‘Humours, Hearts and Hawthorn’, *European Journal of Herbal Medicine*; 5:2, 27–32, cited in Keith Robertson, ‘Goethean Science’ (p. 16.).

Medicine, it has an affinity with the spleen - a usage virtually unrecognised in the West (and indeed the very concept of the 'spleen' as an organ differs across the two systems). Another heart medicine - Foxglove - was also once widely used within folk medicine for a plethora of complaints, including sores and ulcers, wounds, swellings, and 'scabby heads'.⁴⁴ Today it is very little used by herbalists and generally culturally regarded as poisonous, on account of too-slim margins of error within the dosage (it can be fatal). Its cultural meanings (which is to say the ways that its meanings are interpreted in its relationship with people) have changed.⁴⁵ Plants are complex, for-themselves beings; not resources for humans. But they exist in relation, as all living beings do, and the plants that we call herbs are particularly inter-implicated with humans. The changing cultural meanings of a plant have implications for its for-itself meanings - its core medicine; because plants are affected and transformed in relationship with people, just as people are affected and transformed in relationship with plants (as we see in the 'camp followers'). We see it too in cultivars, in which particular attributes of a plant's parent species are emphasised and amplified - the much-beloved Peppermint (a hybrid between Watermint and Spearmint) for example, whose meanings and core medicine as a herb (in conviviality with humans) is strongly expressed in its flavour and aroma. And in plants that have become deeply culturally implicated and whose being is now inextricable, like the Apple that Michael Pollan identifies as an archetype of the human desire for sweetness reflected in nature, and which (cultivated in Europe by means of grafting) found in America, thanks to the colonists' planting of apple seeds for the purposes of cider-making, "the opportunity to discover by trial and error the precise combination of traits required to prosper in the New World".⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Grieve, *A Modern Herbal*, p. 1888. (That "it is one of the best remedies for a scabby head that is" is a quote from Culpeper).

⁴⁵ "Witness their [children's] habit of sucking the honey-bags of the foxglove flowers" writes the Revd. Angus MacFarlane in the 1920s! Cited in Beith, p. 251.

⁴⁶ *Desire*, p. 68.

Sometimes, of course, the cultural establishment of meanings can also be constrictive. Commenting on the influence of scientific research on modern herbalist practice Nikki Darrell notes the way that this amplifies on a cultural level the herbs or qualities of herbs that have been valorised in this way:

Unfortunately, what has happened with a lot of research is that a particular plant becomes known as the one for treating colds and flus (*Echinacea*, elderberry), treating migraine (feverfew), repairing the liver (*Carduus*). All the other aspects of the work they do are often lost; we tend to get stuck in a superficial categorisation of their personality, their medicine. Most people I know do not enjoy being discounted and put in a box like that.⁴⁷

Herbalist practices of listening to, getting to know, and relating to the plant in its whole-being complexity challenge the reductionism of the positivist-capitalist influence, recognising that “[e]ven when they are prescribed purely for physical symptoms they work physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually; they must do because they are conscious, sentient, multidimensional complex beings just like us”.⁴⁸ More than this, she conjectures that perhaps the plants themselves, too, are acting in challenge to these cultural paradigms, calling us to take notice of their existence:

It would appear that at the moment many plants are beginning to speak up for themselves and call our attention to the fact that we have been completely ignoring them as weeds, or as rather insignificant, local, outdated beings that have been superceded by the exotic exciting new favourites, often from overseas, often packaged as products.⁴⁹

Part of the herbalist’s task then, is to listen and respond to this call.

Education as an Amplification of Plants as Living Beings

⁴⁷ *Conversations*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

I asked Cristina Cromer about the dynamics of her relationship with the plants she works with. She responds:

Whenever I journey to meet the plants, at the end I'll say "what can I do for you?" You know, give thanks and make an offering - of anything. And they always say - it's, the only thing they've ever said to me - "tell the people about us; tell the people about us." That's the only thing they want from me. I don't know if that's the same for other people who journey to meet the plants but that's the thing they want from me. "Tell the people about us."

She regards her fulfillment of this request as taking many different forms; "environmental work, obviously", but also a simple "ambassadorship" in which she persistently works to open the eyes of those within her locality to the plants with whom they share their neighbourhood:

I was talking to somebody who works in a shop on Coldharbour Lane and there are three trees on the opposite side of the road from him. And I said "I'm a herbalist." And the questions that come back are varied, but people are interested. So I looked out the window, looking for the nearest green patch as I do, and I said, "do you know what those trees are?" and he said "'I've never looked at them". And I said "do you realise that those are three different trees?" And he said "no." And he'd worked there all that time and he'd never noticed that the trees were three different species! So now he knows and he will notice and he will look. And he may even want to know what the names of the species are at some point! I said "you'll see that they come into leaf at different times and the leaves turn colours at different times" and it was like I had opened the window for him.

Similarly, she tasks her entry level students with acquainting themselves with a "patch of scrub" near where they live, noticing its change through the seasons.

Cromer's day to day educative interventions within her local community are exemplary of the ethical dimension of herbalists' work of responding well to plants as living beings. She works within and in challenge to the generalised context of "nature blindness" (her own term), that she perceives as culturally prevalent. In

helping the shopworker to “realise that there are three separate trees out there”, she restores something of their particularity, erased by the cultural codification of their existence as merely ‘trees’. Her work is a kind of unbackgrounding, quietly helping people to override the ingrained cultural habituation of reductionism of the natural world, and engendering relationship. That is, she helps others to learn how to respond well - to become more response-able - to plants. Clare Holohan similarly names “ a responsibility for educating other people” as an integrally important part of her role as a herbalist, for example in the herb walks, workshops and outdoor work that she facilitates within her community:

Just doing work with the plants really helps people open their eyes to what's around them in the natural world. It transforms a hedgerow into something that's useful and medicinal and edible. [...] Some people [...] might just look at a bit of waste ground - what people think is grass or lawn or something. And I'll see Plantain and Dandelions and Daisies and Ground Elder and all these plants popping up, and other people will just see 'Green'. So, in one way, it's like 'take a closer look and see what's actually there!' And it blows people's minds that all that stuff is there! That, for me - seeing people's minds blown - is just so powerful.

What Clare refers to as ‘seeing people’s minds blown’ might be understood as a form of creating ‘new pathways of perception’, a first step in the ‘reprogramming’ that Buhner describes, allowing for new meanings to emerge; namely, plant meanings. Although, for both Holohan and Cromer, this work takes place in small, interpersonal ways, this also feeds into the amplification of plant-being on a cultural level. If the shopworker whom Cristina took the time to (educate) does indeed at some point decide to find out the names of the three species of tree outside his window, this will be an amplification of the differentiation that he can now read in them; and if he decides to tell a co-worker, this will be another small amplification again. And, as Kohn hopes for another sort of anthropology, the iteration of these amplifications have potency for a challenge to paradigms of reductionism. And this passing on of knowledge is in itself an amplification of the work done within the

context of the practitioner's own relationship with plants:

For those of us who sit with plants in conversation, we start to meet the soul, the spirit of the plant, to get to know them as allies and friends who help us to heal; we listen to them and are also conveyors of their medicine.⁵⁰

The quiet cultivation of habits, amplified through reiteration, contributes to the shape of the cultural story that we in-habit.

Summary

Responding well to plants then, involves affirming them, in their vibrant particularity as lively beings, perhaps with particular gifts to offer, and with particular needs. Affirming, that is, those things that are illuminated by virtue of the enactment of an intentional stance of recognition, and care-ful forms of attention, selecting as meaningful those meanings that are inherent to the plants, expressive of their 'aboutness' which is also their character, and perhaps their medicine, rather than those meanings that we bring that would foreclose and dominate the plant's own. Affirming them involves taking them up and interacting with them - perhaps acting upon them, in ways that might reify, rearticulate or reiterate them. In responding to plants well in these ways, herbalists enact responsibility towards them. It does not necessitate belief - creative connection is sufficient - and in fact it often doesn't necessitate cognition at all. Learning how to attend to plants in ways that facilitate the perception needed to respond well (making of oneself responsible) is, as we've seen, largely a matter of embodied or imaginative connection. Which is to say, learning how to engage with plants on their own terms, in ways that resonate with their ways of being. Relationships of reciprocity are more important than understanding. Thus 'working in their service as gardeners' (as we saw at the end of

⁵⁰ Darrell, *Conversations*, p. 61.

chapter three) is a fundamental way of responding well. Medicine-making is an archetypal form of herbalist responding to plants which may engage all of the herbalists' knowings (cognitive and embodied/intuitive) in selective amplification of herbs' particular virtues in accordance with contextual specificities of desired healing (including, perhaps, particular patient needs). The education of others is oriented towards amplifying plants as living beings. These kinds of immersed, engaged, affirmative, amplificatory respondings echo ecological dynamics of relationship, offering resistance to the reductionism and erasures of those (culturally standard) economic and linguistic modes of responding that amplify their own abstractions.

Chapter Six: Articulation; Speaking with Plants

Introduction

A large part of responding well is a care in the ways that encounters are subsequently articulated, represented, and translated (which care relies upon being able to perceive well, which is in turn supported by practices of space-creation, engaged attention, and responsive/responsible uptake). As I've said already, in practice, plant entanglements and the herbalist work of linking plants to people are not neatly separable into discrete elements in the way that I've categorised and laid them out here. This is clear in the way that response and articulation bleed in to one another: medicine-making is perhaps the quintessential form of herbalist articulation of plants. And herbalism in its entirety could be seen as a responding to and articulating the (culturally obscured) being of plants within the human sphere. The term 'articulation' here describes an outward oriented, projective element of the encounter; an address, whether to the plant with whom one is interacting, other people, or oneself for conscious access or recall. Again, however, this distinction is troubled by the areas discussed. The first half of this chapter explores metaphor in plantwork, which is conceived equally as a form of approach, creating connections, which creation is also a revealing of ecological relationship. The second half considers other forms of language that 'matter', working in close proximity with the communicative flows that ground them. A final section broadens the discussion to consider plant modes of communication and how we conceive them.

6.1 Metaphor

Plant-Metaphor Entanglements

In his 1737 exposition of the principles of his system of botanical nomenclature, *Critica Botanica*, Carl Linnaeus banned metaphors from his new appellatory science, branding them “monstrosities”. Taxonomy, he declared, would have no place for the imprecision of the poetic, “for here we demand the bare and simple truth apart from any trope, metaphor or irony”.¹ Nonetheless, and despite ostensibly barring them from his herbaria, a cursory further glance reveals that Linnaeus was as partial to metaphors as any lowly botanist. His new method of categorising flowers according to sexual characteristics invoked the terminology of the institution of marriage (indeed, ‘marriage’ was the term used for the various arrangements between the reproductive organs of the flower) and, within the bounds of acceptable epithets, developed the practice of naming plants after their ‘discoverer’. Examples are the genus *Dillenia*, which “of all plants has the showiest flower and fruit, even as Dillenius made a brilliant show among Botanists” and *Gronovia*, which “is a climbing plant which grasps all other plants, being called after a man who has had few rivals as a “collector” of plants”.² The Twinflower of Lapland – a favourite species of Linnaeus and later adopted as his emblem – was given the genus name *Linnaea*; “lowly, insignificant, disregarded, flowering but for a brief space — after Linnaeus who resembles it”.³ Curiously, Linnaeus felt it necessary to justify this practice with arguments for their legitimation by means of just the sort of metaphorical associations that he rejects so vehemently elsewhere:

¹ Carl Linnaeus, *Critica Botanica* (1737), cited in Lytle Shaw, ‘Linnaeus: Pruning Names’ in *Cabinet Magazine*, 6 (2002) <<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/6/shaw.php>> [accessed 2 Mar 2021].

² Linnaeus, *Critica Botanica* (1737), cited in Lytle Shaw, ‘Linnaeus’.

³ Linnaeus, *Critica Botanica* (1737), cited in Frans A. Stafleu, *Linnaeus and the Linnaeans: the Spreading of their Ideas in Systematic Botany, 1735–1789* (Utrecht: International Association for Plant Taxonomy, 1971), p. 83.

It is commonly believed that the name of a plant which is derived from that of a Botanist shows no connection between the two. But anyone who has but slight knowledge of the history of letters will easily discover a link by which to connect the name with the plant, and indeed there will be such a charm in the association that it will never fade from his memory.⁴

And certainly, despite Linnaeus's justificatory re-invocation of metaphorical likeness, it is certain that he was neither oblivious nor impervious to the political or perhaps romantic value of having a flower named after oneself, as evident in his strange request to Lady Anne Monson (a plant collector, whom he had never met) "that I may be permitted to join with you in the procreation of just one little daughter to bear witness of our love - a little Monsonia, through which your fame will live forever in the Kingdom of Flora".⁵ Moreover, Lisbet Koerner notes how the practicality, simplicity, and avoidance of rhetoric that Linnaeus developed for his own writing style echoed both his Lutheran upbringing and 18th century tastes, arguing that "his preference for plain style, even in scientific writing, was itself a form of rhetoric [...] bound up, for example, with his particular ethical perspective"; its lack of metaphor itself somewhat a metaphor.⁶ But religious austerity was little match for vanity, rivalry and ambition. Like unpermitted thoughts, or weeds in the garden, the banished "flowers of rhetoric" crept back in.

In fact, the entanglement of plants and metaphor is stubbornly persistent throughout the history of plant encounters in the West. Within astrological herbalism, for example (which disciplines Elisabeth Brooke describes as "inseparable" for the Ancients and for much of herbalism's return to Europe), the association of plants with astrological entities and events offered a metaphorical framework for what was regarded a science of plant inquiry.⁷ The characteristics of

⁴ Linnaeus, *Critica Botanica* (1737), partially cited in Lytle Shaw, 'Linnaeus'.

⁵ Wilfrid Blunt, *The Compleat Naturalist. A Life of Linnaeus* (London: Collins, 1971), p. 224.

⁶ Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 26.

⁷ Brooke, *Traditional WHM*, p. 16.

plants are interpretable - and can be systematised, understood and intuited - in terms of the qualities imparted by their astrological constitution, thus "herbs ruled by Mars tend to be sharp, cutting, stinging, strong-flavoured and bitter", examples being "Garlic, Onion, Chilli, Nettle, Thistles, Brambles, Ginger, Pepper, Leeks and Mustard".⁸ The Doctrine of Signatures (which we'll look at later in this chapter) understood plants to offer perceptible indication of their medicinal qualities; such that the yellow root of dock indicated its helpfulness for a jaundiced liver, and the brain-like appearance of walnuts indicated a use for brain function. And the narrative and story of folk tradition is, of course, replete with characterisation and symbolisation - the tangled beauty and pain of thorned Roses; the strength-giving hardship and endurance of Nettles; the supportive steadfast reliability of Oak; the sweetness and innocence-knowledge play of Strawberries.

Metaphor figures commonly within contemporary herbalist practice. In her work with patients, Cristina Cromer draws upon a somatics framework, using metaphor, imagery and narrative to facilitate access to, articulate, and understand symptoms and sickness. She describes her work as the unravelling of an interrupted story, using the metaphor of a tapestry:

When a patient comes into my room they're coming in with a tangled mess. [...] They've got tangled up. The threads have become tangled and they can't go on with the story. Or at least not that part of it. [...] And it's got worse over the years as they've tried to live around it. So it's my job to say "okay, let's see if we can untangle this!"

The healing work is conceived as the task of reweaving the threads, trying to discern the intended "overarching pattern" and change the tangle into "something beautiful", and foundational to her capacity to contribute to that process is curiosity and an "ability to listen to the story". Moreover, she conceives of her relationship with plants as grounded in the same skills:

⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

And I think it's the same attitude that enables a person to listen to the plants as well. [...] In plants too, it's a living vital story. And we have to render it into mythology and symbology because, how do we speak the language of plants?! You know, we can't! Because we're different - we live in different kingdoms - so it has to be filtered and rendered through human sensibility and that's story.

Thus:

When people ask me about St John's Wort, I tell about the plant by telling about John the Baptist. It makes the plant makes sense to people in a way that it's difficult to express without telling the story.

In this way, she is able to articulate something that is faithful to the plant as a living being - its 'living vital story' - translating something otherwise ineffable into a relatable framework. Within Christopher Hedley (also known for his stories) and Non Shaw's refined procedure for "whole body" sensory appreciation of the plant (which is to say, 'organoleptic assessment', or 'tea tasting') they instruct the student to "try to finish the phrase 'it is like...'", For example, "[i]t is like: a season, a time of day, a person you know, an animal, a piece of scenery, a colour, a nice day out", adding "again be free with your language".⁹ A similar deployment of metaphor is in use within some forms of herbalism in the form of 'correspondences', wherein plants are either associated with or figured as particular instances of other categories of thing for the purposes of facilitating understanding and relation; elements, planets, deities, and so forth. For example, Mugwort is associated with the earth element, the planet Venus, and the goddesses Artemis or Diana.¹⁰

⁹ (Although technically simile.) These questions invite us to feel into and imaginatively rearticulate aspects of a plant as it strikes us in ways that build bridges between our experience and our own frameworks of understanding. They do so by helping us to focus upon and draw out certain elements of the plant as it strikes us in relation. Hedley and Shaw, p. xxxix.

¹⁰ Scott Cunningham, *Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2016), p. 178.

What is it about metaphor that lends itself so well to plantwork? Common in our everyday language, thought and action, metaphor works by representing one thing as another (typically more familiar) thing, thus illuminating elements of the first and facilitating understanding.¹¹ It creates connection across difference, pulling disparate items into relationship with one another, and with us. It's mechanism is akin to storytelling, or characterisation; the aim is not to know the first thing in its entirety, but rather to cast a new light upon it by representing some particular storied essence of it. Often it focuses on sensory, visceral or emotional aspects of the thing being used as a figure to invoke felt responses as a bridge for understanding. It paints a picture in such a way that we can feel a sense of connection with it, offering us a handle or an anchor for relation. Metaphor then, is a tool of relation - between different elements of reality (or non-reality) and ourselves.

There are ontological implications within this strategy of re-presentation. Firstly, that representation is important. How a thing is presented matters. Perspectives matter.¹² And to use a mode of presentation that allows us to feel connection with a thing can cause it to matter to us.¹³ Secondly then, it emphasises relation, foregrounding subjectivity. It tells a version of reality; it tells of that which is alive and present in a thing, for us, in that moment, inviting us to focus on those elements of connection in our relation with the thing, and to share a feeling of those qualities. It speaks to the storied nature of the world. It is also about approach. Imagining one thing 'as if' it were another, we make a little leap across a boundary of reality, and in doing so, we get a little closer to that first thing in our

¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson offer the following definition: "[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 36.

¹² The way that the mattering of perspectives (across species relations) functions as a premise for ecological inter-relation (which is to say how life flourishes) is a key theme for Kohn, who opens with a story of being instructed to sleep face-up so as to be perceived by potential predatory jaguars as person rather than meat.

¹³ Starhawk makes this point in her discussion of 'the Goddess' as a symbol, emphasising its enabling qualities for women (Starhawk, p. 24). She later revises this thinking in line with changed personal and cultural understandings around gender (p. 215). This illustrates the way that metaphors are only useful in so far as they can successfully evoke connection, and in this way they remain closely tied to presence.

understanding (but never surpassing the 'as if' of difference). A fourth implication then is the fundamentality of possibility: in offering selective, storied versions of things, it recognises and heeds multiplicity.¹⁴ As such, the functioning of metaphor accords well with an ecological framework of understanding.

It is easy to see why metaphoric language did not sit well with Linnaeus' enterprise of the comprehensive ordering of the natural world (in service to an omniscient new world order of Godly European Reason). Underlying his project were the ideologies and insecurities of the age; the discovery of the America's (full of unknown plants and peoples) disrupting the conceit of a comprehensive human knowledge and dominion, and fuelling a colonial drive to reassert the grand visions of civilisation, reimposing God's order on the unruly excess of nature. From this standpoint, metaphor - with its refusal to define or determine, its accommodation of relative perspectives, its storying tendencies, its frequent invocation of the sensory, the visceral, the emotional in favour of the abstract - is suspect. Just as all of the traditional world-rooted knowledge of those plant-connected cultures from which colonial explorers gathered their specimens found itself whitewashed (appropriated; erased; destroyed) in the development of the clinical Western science of botany, so the puritanical purging of the inassimilable rhetoricity of metaphor from taxonomic classification served the colonial need for order, control and dominion. The claim then is not only that we could read into this Linnaean purging of metaphor a metaphor for the closing-off of thought to the beyond-the-human, but that it also was an exemplary and significant instance of the project of reason. Plants were (as explored earlier) archetypal of the ecological and of 'wildness' and the new science of botany, in taming and regulating this unruly wildness through classification, supported the construction of the encompassing new world order of Godly European Reason.

¹⁴ Starhawk again: "[m]etaphors themselves are not contradictory or antithetical; many can be true at once. They point to something beyond themselves; they are separate lights beaming at the same spot" (p. 202).

But in fact, metaphor is very well entrenched within the structure of EuroWestern thinking. The extent of this was demonstrated by linguists Lakoff and Johnson, who revealed how “our ordinary conceptual system is largely metaphorical” and thus “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor”, of which metaphors, reflecting the values of our culture, we are frequently unaware.¹⁵ Which obliviousness is partially on account of the metaphors that we use to conceptualise language itself (a ‘container’ into which we put our ideas to ‘send’ to others who ‘take them out’); we tend to perceive language as neutral.¹⁶ Again, we see this reflected in Linnaeus’ strategy. Overtly, metaphors are excluded as irrational; poetic flourishes; the ‘flowers of rhetoric’. Covertly, they thoroughly structure our thought and behaviours, shaping our lives with the stories of our culture. We operate according to metaphors that we have not chosen, that we do not recognise as such, and which conceptualisations seem to us natural and inherent within reality itself, by virtue of the seeming neutrality of language.¹⁷ Recognising the function of metaphor involves recognising the poetic gesture at the heart of the language that shapes our shared realities; the power of language, thought and concepts to construct realities. But such a recognition does not fit with the myth of objective reality. Thus the overtly and self-consciously metaphorical is banished to the realm of poetry.¹⁸ The constructedness of the world, its storied nature, and our own power to shape and story it, is denied. Thus the metaphors that are integral to our experience of reality, are invisibilised. They metaphors that we live by (to take the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s classic work) are no longer themselves living.

¹⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10, drawing on the work of Michael Reddy.

¹⁷ For example the ‘time is money’ metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson associate with Westernisation as a global force (p. 146). Again, this understanding is neatly encapsulated in the philosophical tradition in Nietzsche’s formula, an original translation of which read “truth is metaphor, the metaphoricity of which has been forgotten”.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 159.

Within the sanctioned domain of the literary poetic, metaphors are illuminated and foregrounded. Here, they retain their interactive vitality, but lose much of their world-constructive force, as they are regarded to pertain to 'art' rather than 'reality'. Turned back on the world, they regain it. I venture that, for all of the reasons that metaphor was unacceptable for Linnaeus, it is a powerful tool for poetic modes of approach to cultivating relationships of exchange and understanding between people and plants. Its ability to offer a connective middle language in which to find ways of articulating, for our own comprehension, things that would not easily otherwise be expressed by means of the language and frameworks of thought that we typically inhabit supports us to find points of connection and resonance across the difference of our respective modes of being (whilst staying grounded in our own identities). Self-consciously deployed, metaphor animates language, exploiting an explicitly interpretative 'as if' mode of conceptualisation to imbue things with character and feeling, eliciting imaginative and felt responses, forging connection and feeding relation. Moreover, metaphor can function as a mode of attunement, by means of our own thought-language, to the flows of feeling and meaning that course hidden and latent within it - its originary gestures. Holding open space for the sensory, the subjective, the interpretative and imaginative, metaphor is able to keep language vulnerable to those flows which inhere within and inspire it. In doing so, it mediates between the various nested levels of language; we can at once enter into those feeling, sensory modes of exchange that are necessary for cultivating sensitivity to the communicative offerings of plants whilst also keeping a foot within the habitual abstract human language that allow us to register these experiences on a more permanent conscious level, and to re-express and share them. Thus metaphor can bridge the extremities of linguistic emergence; the self-referential abstract language of the social sphere, and the world/body rooted expressive gesturings in which it is grounded.

Metaphor in Plant Scholarship and Contestations

Outside of herbalist practice, many plant scholars of diverse disciplines have used metaphor to help us conceive the similarities within our differentially embodied ways of being in the world. For example, in their work of popular botany, *Brilliant Green*, Mancuso and Viola use our own five physical senses as metaphors to help us understand and describe certain of the sensory mechanisms and capacities of plants. They argue that our overlooking of the existence of such sensible capacity within the plant is on account of our anthropocentric understanding of such functions as necessarily associated with some physical locus – an organ, whereas “plant organisms have evolved so as to avoid concentrating their functions in a single area of the body, and thus circumvent the risk that being a snack for an herbivore will end tragically for the plant”.¹⁹ Mancuso and Viola discover light-receptors in not only the leaves, but also “the youngest part of the stem, the tendrils, shoots, shoot tips, as well as the wood [...] as if the whole plant were covered with tiny eyes”. They identify receptors that pick up biogenic volatile organic compounds “from the root to the leaves” such that “we must admit that they really do have superfine “noses”” (although the ‘noses’ of our plants are akin to “our having not one nose but millions of tiny noses scattered all over our body”). Similarly, “[t]he roots continually taste the soil in search of “appetizing” nutrients such as nitrates, phosphates, or potassium, which they can locate with great precision even in very limited amounts”; “small sensory organs called mechanosensitive channels, found [...] with greatest frequency on the epidermal cells” contribute something that we might describe as a sense of touch, and the capacity of these same mechanosensitive channels to pick up vibration and respond to information contained within it lead the authors to contend that “the whole plant is capable of hearing, somewhat as if - below and above ground - it were covered

¹⁹ Mancuso and Viola, p. 50. This line of argument echoes Marder’s presentation of plants in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘bodies-without-organs’.

with millions of tiny ears".²⁰ Using these and other 'senses', plants have a being that is sensitive and attuned to the world around them. It is on account of some of our own sensory capacities - to perceive and pick up information from light and sound waves for example – sharing commonality with those of plants that we are able to intercept and interpret some of their communicative outputs. That we tend to find these commonalities by 'going down' into our own physicality mirrors the nested structure of language as an emergent phenomenon.²¹

The usefulness of metaphor in helping us to speak about things that our language can't accommodate in straightforward designatory terms is perhaps even more acute when the commonalities or similarities are more obscure. For example, the myriad other sense-capacities that plants have for which we have no analogue and of which we have no easily relatable experience (such as their capacities to interact with the world via electro-magnetic interception and output). Metaphor can help us talk about and conceptualise things that are very distant from our experience. In broader terms, sometimes plantworkers might characterise the broader operations of plants analogically in very familiar conceptual human terms, such as when we speak of plants 'thinking' or 'feeling'. If understood literally - at least for neuroscientists and psychologists - these are problematic and imprecise words that are misleading in our considerations of plant capacities, but understood in an analogic or metaphoric mode, such familiar concepts can allow us to approach the particular being-in-the-world of plants in a way that would be difficult were our concepts deemed simply not applicable to the being of plants.

The usage of metaphor as a tool of approach to plants is predictably contested.

²⁰ Mancuso and Viola, pp. 50, 53, 57, 67, 74. I invoke these examples for their presentational style, however see original for references to studies.

²¹ An interesting line of speculation might be followed on the ways that the highly developed emergent form of language that is unembodied and transient accords with a mode of being that is primarily mobile (Mancuso and Viola speculate that the key defining point of separation in the development of plants and creatures is this divergence of evolutionary strategies for the meeting of survival needs; animals doing so primarily through motility (broadly definitive of being a 'predator') where the plant world has opted to source energy from the sun whilst remaining rooted (broadly defining plants as prey) (p. 3).

Many see a danger in using techniques of anthropomorphism as a form of approach; that it will return us to a position of anthropocentric foreclosing of plant alterity, recasting plants in our own image once more rather than allowing their own representations to emerge (more on this shortly). The language of plant cognitive capacities (which concepts seem generally more contentious than plant sense-capacities) has been the arena of heated debates.²² Daniel Chamowitz, for example, as previously mentioned, rejects the term 'plant intelligence' in reference to the information processing capacities of root systems, preferring the much broader 'plant awareness'²³ (and others have rejected the term for less charitable, which is to say human exceptionalist, reasons).²⁴ Another interesting challenge comes from Nancy Baker who offers an alternative approach grounded in Wittgenstein's attempts to deconstruct the effects of the ways that we apply concepts (with tendencies towards generalisation and objectification). Wittgenstein works from the idea that in our 'ordinary' ways of speaking "there is no essence, no single thing that all referents of the same word or concept have in common".²⁵ Instead, he puts forward the idea of the cohesion of meaning within concepts as a matter of 'family resemblances' or of 'threads' with overlapping fibres. In this picture, the ways that we use the concepts of 'behaviour' or 'intelligence' are already broad and flexible enough to include the (different but similar) actions and capacities of plants - which strategy is reflected in the approach of plant scientists who seek to normalise this broader usage.²⁶ Metaphor, Baker argues, is superfluous in this case, because in our ordinary ways of speaking we can easily and naturally extend concepts like

²² Michael Pollan, 'The Intelligent Plant', *New Yorker* 89:42 (December 2013) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

²³ Daniel Chamowitz, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), pp. 252-64.

²⁴ This question also finds interesting resonance in herbalists' expansion of the language and concepts of cognition to accommodate broader embodied functions as regards human capacities of thought. For example Cristina Cromer says "I've always been aware that we are basically a walking mind [...] the brain in the skull is just one small part of it. We have nerve tissue, brain tissue, in our hearts... there's the enteric nervous system... I would be astonished if we don't find similar structures in the other viscera as well - little sentient bundles of intelligent mind in the kidneys and the liver". Similarly Nikki Darrell talks of the 'gut-brain' and the 'heart-brain', and both she and Nathaniel Hughes invoke the concept of 'gnosis' as a mode of non-cerebral knowing appropriate to plant relationships.

²⁵ Nancy E. Baker, 'The Intelligence of Plants and the Problem of Language: A Wittgensteinian Approach' in Gagliano et al. (eds), *Language*, pp. 136-54 (p. 139).

²⁶ See, for example, Anthony Trewavas, 'Aspects of Plant Intelligence', *Annals of Botany*, 92:1 (2003), 1-20.

'recognition', for example, to include plants:

The plant recognizes kin and does not compete; the plant recognizes self in its roots as opposed to not-self in the roots of another plant; the plant recognizes the threat of drought, and so on - and in ways that are not predetermined. There is no need for "as if." It would sound silly to say "the plant is behaving as if it is recognizing such and such".²⁷

More than this, to conceive of these descriptions as metaphor, for Baker, is rooted in the same anthropocentric human exceptionalism that we are trying to move away from. This is a matter of approach, which stance she conceives to be more characteristic of "the essentializing plant scientist and, perhaps, 'the philosopher in us'" than of our habitual ways of speaking and relating. She says: "[t]hose who object to the use of the word intelligent for plant behavior seem to have some particular definition in mind and forget that we all apply the word to the behavior of animals and children and that its application is indeterminate. There is a metaphysics underlying the assumption that maintains that human beings are the standard of everything".²⁸

In Baker's critique, our language is already quite adequate to the task of accommodating an understanding of kinship and shared (or divergent but apprehensible) capacities with the rest of the living world. It is through the influence of intellectual theoretical schemas that we misuse it to exclude plants from its descriptions and covertly reinforce schemas of human exceptionalism even when ostensibly aiming towards the opposite; in ordinary speech we quite easily speak of plants as alive, sentient, agential, self-purposed beings. Implicit within this is the suggestion that in our 'ordinary' ways of thinking and relating to the world, kinship and familiarity with plant and creature others is an effortless baseline of understanding. Baker's ideas resonate with many Indigenous ways of speaking

²⁷ Baker, p. 146.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 183.

about and conceiving the plants with which humans share their worlds. When Mary Siisip Geniusz tells of “the white gleam of Nimishoomis-wiigwaas, Grandfather Birch, and the tall spires of Nookomis-giizhik, Grandmother Cedar” she is not speaking in metaphors.²⁹ These names describe plant-human relationships of kinship that are real; the concept of ‘grandfather’ includes both birch trees and human grandfathers, and the concept of ‘grandmother’ includes cedar, as well as human grandmothers.

Baker’s critiques and insights are important. They call out a needful demarcation of the usage of metaphor, to avoid its recuperation for those insidiously entrenched agendas of human exceptionalism and superiority in a way that (recalling Plumwood’s critique of Dennett) takes with one hand what it appears to be giving with the other. To mistake things that are real for metaphors can be problematic. In this way, calling something a metaphor denies its reality, consigning it to the realm of the not-real (the fictional, the poetical). Frequently, this deployment of metaphor as a subtle tool of denial serves political agendas of the upkeep of the hegemonies of EuroWestern thought paradigms. These points are made by Vanessa Watts, who draws on a telling of the Anishinaabe Creation Story within her account of ‘Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans’. She writes:

Before continuing, I would like to emphasize that these two events took place. They were not imagined or fantasized. This is not lore, myth or legend. These histories are not longer versions of “and the moral of the story is....”. This is what happened.³⁰

Again, this transgresses the EuroWestern cultural understanding of ‘story’ and ‘history’ as opposed to one another; story the realm of the imagination (which is to say the ‘not real’) and history the realm of distantiated, uninvolved, objective fact.

²⁹ *Plants*, p. 42.

³⁰ Vanessa Watts, ‘Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2:1 (2013), 20-34 (21).

These stories of the Creation *are* histories, and they open onto reality past and present, facilitating connection:

Maybe it seems like I am telling stories but really I am commenting on two examples of historical events that took place in a particular location, at a particular time, where consciousness, thought, desire, and the imagination of all individuals is in action. In an epistemological-ontological frame, Indigenous cosmologies would be examples of a symbolic interconnectedness – an abstraction of a moral code. It would be a way in which to view the world – the basis for an epistemological stance. From a Haudenosaunee worldview, this is what happened.³¹

Watts' analyses again highlight the limitations of legitimacy of a poetic framework of approach as inappropriate for and inapplicable to (Indigenous and other) knowledge paradigms whose reach exceeds the anthropocentrically-bounded, EuroWestern cultural structures of 'epistemological-ontological' thinking. The poetic as a helpful framework for engagement with the living world beyond the human is meaningful and potent within the cultural context of EuroWestern rationalist-postivism that constructs it as a form of non-knowledge, pertaining to the fictive, the imaginary, and the non-real.

The deployment of the category of metaphor in service to political agendas of positivism also occurs within the boundaries of EuroWestern thinking as a common scientific disparagement, or denial (we can think back here to Caldwell's analysis of magical metaphor in scientific 'boundary work').³² In his editorial for *Introduction to Biosemiotics*, Marcello Barbieri finds this strange move "at the heart of modern science", where "[o]n the one hand it is acknowledged that the genetic code is the bedrock of life, and on the other hand it is underlined that it is not a real code" as its purported function of producing *meaning* is not a thing that falls within the purview of science. Thus, "according to the dominant paradigm, the genetic code is

³¹ Ibid., p. 26.

³² See section 3.2 Creating Culture: Culture Creation can Function as Space Creation.

fundamentally a *metaphor*... a linguistic construction that we use in order to avoid long periphrases when we talk about living systems, but no more than that".³³ He continues:

It is probably one of the most deeply dividing issues of modern science. Many biologists are convinced that the genetic code is a real and fundamental component of life, but physicalists insist that it is real only in a very superficial sense and that there is nothing fundamental about it because it must be reducible in principle, to physical quantities. This, in fact, is the only answer that allows people to say that there are no signs and meanings at the basis of life, and that semiotic processes are not fundamental events. But what a price to pay! It is perfectly right to mention the genetic code practically in every single problem of biology, provided one keeps in mind that it is not meant to be serious.³⁴

It is in this double-handed way that talk of plant awareness, or plant thinking, or plant feeling might often be accommodated into EuroWestern discourse. In this way, metaphor can be deployed as smoke and mirrors, serving to reinforce human exceptionalism whilst seeming to concede plant autonomy (or reinforce colonial othering and dismissal of Indigenous realities whilst seeming to concede credence). These are incredibly important nuances requiring a careful attention. Within a context of European plantwork, metaphor is a useful tool of approach for both bridging and preserving difference, but care must be taken with regard to how it is used.

How is metaphor used well then, and what are the cautions that must be observed? Well, first of all, some metaphors definitely are metaphors. The Welsh name for the Poppy - *llygad y bwgan* - meaning 'goblin's eye', or the folk name 'cuckoo's boots' for Bluebells, are clearly metaphors illuminating particular characteristics or associations of the plant. And sometimes, to recognise metaphors as such is crucial where difference is in danger of being consumed and things conflated (metaphor

³³ Marcello Barbieri (ed), *Introduction to Biosemiotics: The New Biological Synthesis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), p. x.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. xi.

always retains difference across connection). As far as plant qualities and capacities go, discerning these boundaries is likely going to involve a lot of nuance. For myself, I could imagine extending my concept of smell to make room for plant capacities to pick up on airborne aromatic compounds, or perhaps hearing to accommodate plant capacities to perceive sound vibration. I find it more difficult to allow for the idea of a plant being covered in a million tiny noses or (and) a million tiny ears, and in this case would prefer a more specialised word. But perhaps it's a matter of linguistic taste.

And moreover, despite the capacity of our ordinary language to accommodate an understanding of plants as meaningful, autonomous beings, to whom we might relate as kin, this is poorly supported by our cultural frameworks, which for the most part, do not. We may talk of a plant striving towards the light, or preferring shade, but we are just as accustomed to talking of tree-bodies as timber, Roses as a bouquet, and Carrots as one of our 'five-a-day'. Although we might be able to speak easily enough and unmetaphorically of plant behaviour or intelligence or even personhood if we choose, this does not just lead straightforwardly on to a recognition and respect of plant lives and livelihoods.³⁵ Mary Siisip Geniusz's account of the disappearance of the 'Grandmother Cedar' epithet from Anishinaabeg usage illustrates acutely this dependence of word-sense on cultural contexts:

Kee often said that only in recent times would an Anishinaabeg have said, "Cedar" without the honorific title of "Nookomis, My Grandmother." That started to happen only with the employment of large numbers of Anishinaabeg in the lumbering business. One could not make war on one's own grandmother and chop her down with an ax! The mindset had to change if that was the only way to make a living.³⁶

³⁵ "The lesson from animist cultures is that such a dialogue must be situated and embodied in care relationships with specific plants and plant communities" (Matthew Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', *Religions*, 10:5 (2019), p. 317).

³⁶ *Plants*, p. 40.

In this instance, the change in the sense that words make and ways that they're used (the rendering impossible of terms that articulate kinship with forests designated as lumber) is a correlate of the wider cultural - and literal - genocide (and ecocide, which in this account are one and the same) of colonialism. Again, this example illuminates not only the limitations of this discussion but also of this project as a whole. Language use shapes thoughts and habits and helps to shape culture, but words rely for their sense upon the worlds that they articulate. The ways in which replenishing a culture of ecological connection and reciprocity has political power within a EuroWestern paradigm is attenuated by the power of that paradigm; the vast nexus of (white supremacist, human exceptionalist) EuroWestern culture and its support structures - both abstract and material - remains the ongoing political context within which all relationships are rooted. Any consideration of the potency of WHM practitioner praxes of cultivating plant relationships is measured against this vaster political context of (historical and ongoing) EuroWestern colonial violence and all efforts towards the redressing of ecological violence gain import and make sense only when situated within more extensive efforts of redress of other forms.

An attention towards the political and cultural configuration of the contexts wherein our language (thoughts and actions) derive (as well as construct) sense is important, and so is an attention to the limitations of (metaphor and) language as reflective of our human (all too human) situatedness with regard to plants. Metaphor and the tools of the poetic infuse language with the vibrancy of living communicative exchange, gesturing beyond the linguistic frameworks that contain them to affective exchanges and real world-relations, but they also remain fundamentally a part of the thought-language-habit nexus that mediates our relations with the world. Careful usage involves recognising and owning this. Plants are integrally other - are of a different 'kingdom' - and whatever language we use to better conceive and articulate them is always an approximation. The same can be said of a poetic approach more broadly. But within a context of cultural human exceptionalism, tools

that enable us to acknowledge, own and extend the limitations of our own constrained positionality are valuable, and metaphor, and other poetic tools, are potent in this respect. So, with regard to using metaphor well, distinguishing between its different operations - as a straightforward literary device, as a tool of intentional poetic world-connection, and as a tool of subtle reinforcement of dualist boundarying of the objective real (including those instances when what we might perceive as metaphors and stories are realities and histories) - is critical, as is an acute attention to the contributive contexts wherein words draw their sense.

So again, in sum, their potency here has to do with *how* we use them. When metaphor is employed in the service of conceiving, revealing and reifying ecological connection, it is torn from its tamed identity as a literary device, putting poetic language into the service of *poiesis*. To take up a formula from activist discourse, it is a way of 'making the poetic a threat again'. In this way, metaphor is more than just metaphor (more than a literary device). Its potency is in its capacity to effect real relation, which capacity is measured within other contextual aspects of the real. For the herbalists whose work is figured in this project and the plants they work with, these relationships are real - the boundaries of their respective realities include one another. And to describe a plant using metaphor describes something real about it, lending the weight of articulation to perception. In the same way that poetic license, as it pertains to herbalist-plant relationships, is not an embellishment of ornamental language or imaginative whimsy to perception but rather the deployment of a familiar tool to strategically broaden the boundaries of what is conceptually possible within our cultural framework. And the suspension of disbelief when used together with proactive, reifying forms of action, creates space for other realities. Each, when used in a certain way, is a tool for breaking open the bounds of our anthropocentrically constricted language-thought-habit-worlds, to get at something real. The power of the poetic is to exceed itself. Again, perhaps ultimately we could do away with the idea of 'the poetic'; it is, whilst broader and more inclusive than

the narrow strictures of rationalist/positivist paradigms, another system of description. But within the bounded cultural context wherein these paradigms have hegemonic hold, it is potent.

Empathy, Metaphor, Projection

Another way that metaphor serves poetic plant relations is in its resonance with the workings of empathy: the use of one (as an intentionally deployed strategy of relation) often invites the other. Each can work to create space for imaginative inhabitation, so that we can move closer, in feeling and understanding, to some position, experience or idea that differs from the one that we occupy (or that occupies us), connecting with another perspective whilst remaining grounded in a more familiar one. Empathy, when consciously engaged, involves the 'trying out' - the temporary imaginative inhabitation of - another person's perspectival position whilst retaining a firm grounding in your own (a common metaphor for empathic engagement is to 'walk in someone else's shoes'). Another way of saying this would be that empathy employs the 'as if' mode of approach to allow us to enter into the perceptual world of another. This type of 'cognitive', imaginative, intentional empathy underlies feminist and ethicist Lori Gruen's call for a strategic and considered strategy of what she calls "engaged empathy" as a mechanism of enhancing one's 'moral perception' with regard to nature.³⁷ As engaged empathy involves "understanding the perspective and situation of others from their point of view", requiring "both knowledge of and an affective connection with the other",³⁸ the self and its interests and projections are necessarily decentred. The cognitive aspect of this kind of engagement involves learning about and imagination of the other's perspective and making a judgement as to appropriate action. Although I

³⁷ Lori Gruen, 'Attending to Nature: Empathetic Engagement with the More than Human World', *Ethics and the Environment*, 14:2 (2009), 23-38, (27-9).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

don't take up Gruen's particular definition (which is informed by animal rights work), it is this sort of intentional, strategic empathy that I consider here. The element of learning about the particularities of the other is helpful but not essential in plantwork, where non-cognitive ways of coming to understand plants are also engaged (as illustrated by the practices of connecting with plants without knowing what they are). Practices that engage empathy in this way as a tool of strategic connection give us the insight that empathy invites possibilities of care or compassion but doesn't require them, and that it opens one up to possibilities of perspectival shift but does not require perspectival agreement.³⁹

In this strategic guise, empathy is (like metaphor) a mode of approach. It is an attempt to get closer to the other whilst preserving the difference between us.⁴⁰ It does so via an effort of attunement; it is an attempt to enact a state of mind or a state of feeling that helps us to inhabit something of the perspective of another. That is, we employ strategies of 'acting as if' or acting-towards in our efforts to make real - a movement of poetic production, from empathy as a verb towards empathy as a noun. The striving-towards is key. But that we can actively engage our capacities of empathy is on account of them being there in the first place. That is, that we can elicit empathy for another by means of engaging empathetically is premised in an underlying baseline empathy that allows us to connect with others not (like) us. This is the baseline of ecological kinship obscured by our cultural paradigms of exceptionalism and estrangement (the solidarity 'default to the biosphere' that Timothy Morton names the 'symbiotic real').⁴¹ In helping us to inhabit, feel, sense, imagine, resonate with the perspectives of the other, empathy can put us in touch with our basic ecological connectedness, illuminating, emphasising and engaging it. The effort involved – the striving towards – and the

³⁹ Non-violent communication is one example.

⁴⁰ Gruen argues for the necessity of ethically maintaining the self-other distinction, citing the struggles of marginalised identities for self-definition, whilst rejecting domination and subordination (*ibid.*, p. 34).

⁴¹ Morton, p. 14.

intentionality are key to the ethical potential of empathy. There is an openness and a willingness to encounter other beings closer to where they are; to meet them on their own terms, within their own framework of values or perspectival logic. In empathic connection, we acknowledge that our story is not the only one, and open ourselves to the story of the other.

Empathy then, is already a part of our being as being-with. It is a recognition of the ways that we are connected with other beings that are not only not us, but also not like us. That I can look at a plant and think that it looks healthy or is struggling, that I can recognise that it wants water or is enjoying the sunshine, is a facet of this basic empathy. But it is also a strategy and skill that may be learned and cultivated and enacted. We might make efforts to tune into that plant and get a sense of that enjoyment of the sun - maybe lie down next to it - and in this form it is helpful as a mode of approach to plants because it makes connections across ontological difference whilst allowing us to remain anchored in the identities and perspectives that arise from our own human-bodied positionalities. Its propensity to invoke other ethically potent qualities such as care and identification, without these being prerequisites of engagement, enables it to serve as an intermediary stepping stone for ethical relation towards things that might seem so distant from or alien to us that it could be otherwise difficult to include them in our moral sphere. It also reflects the complex and inter-related nature of the world, accommodating and affirming the existence of multiple different realities situated in multiple different smallworlds, by allowing "the holding of simultaneously opposing states of mind".⁴² It accords well with a storied understanding of the world. Both metaphor and empathy make use of familiar resources to put us in touch with spaces, and feel a resonance with experiences, that do not lend themselves easily to the shared thought-language frameworks that we usually inhabit. Empathy helps us to experience that which is

⁴² Alfred Margulies, *The Empathic Imagination* (New York: WW Norton, 1989).

beyond our boundaries of experience and “metaphor helps say the unsayable”.⁴³ In this way, it also holds transformative potential, putting us in touch with places of new understanding and experience. Striving for resonance across individuation, empathy foregrounds connection over separation and difference, working against the distantiating that can be an obstacle to care. When used in this way, empathy is an ethical relation-towards that illuminates and amplifies our constitutive being-in-common.

Vehement critique of empathy as a strategy for approaching plants, or as the ground for an ecological ethics, comes from Michael Marder, who argues that the inassimilable difference of plant being precludes any efforts towards connection with them based on commonality or continuity as these efforts “disregard the uniqueness of vegetal beings”, subsuming the radical alterity of plant ontology under a ‘totalising vitalism’ that, again, reinforces our own anthropocentric biases.⁴⁴ Empathy he regards as a self-serving projection; a ‘depositing’ of our own interior worlds of feeling into plants (who have no interior being, but which we have illegitimately constructed as such) to allow us a handle for intimacy and identification.⁴⁵ Marder’s anti-metaphysical conception of plant being emphasises non-identity; oriented always towards their environment and constituted within this relation of radical dependence, the ‘voicelessness’ of plants precludes the auto-affection that would allow for any sort of self-coincidence and the recuperation of a sense of self from their vigorous worldly expressions.⁴⁶ On this understanding, empathy is impossible because plants have no inner worlds to relate to. We cannot ‘feel into’ them because they have no depth.⁴⁷ And because they themselves “live

⁴³ Cameron, Lynne J. *Metaphor and Reconciliation: The Discourse Dynamics of Empathy in Post-Conflict Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 4. This account resonates with Starhawk’s description of the use of the ‘Goddess’ metaphor for the articulation of ‘That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told’.

⁴⁴ Michael Marder, ‘The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy’, *Dialogue*, 51:2 (2012), 259–73 (260).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴⁶ *Plant Thinking*, p. 74.

⁴⁷ The term ‘empathy’ originated as a translation of the German ‘*emfühlung*’, which literally translated means ‘feeling into’.

without feeling, or, at the very least, without feeling themselves feel".⁴⁸ We can't form a relationship with them as self and other because their identity is too dispersed and multiple to be 'gathered into a whole'. As a result, empathic identification is conceived as an insidious narcissistic conceit: "[w]hen humans empathize with plants, they, thus, ultimately empathize with themselves, turning the object of empathy into a blank screen, onto which essentially human emotions are projected... a means for personal catharsis and an outlet for the content of bad conscience."⁴⁹

Somewhere within Marder's critique there seems to be the worry that plants are themselves transformed into mere metaphors; for our own feelings/inner worlds, or for totalising concepts. Although arising from an overview of the treatment of plants at the hands of the history of Western philosophy, his concern seems to also target spiritual approaches as 'Life' and 'Spirit' are held up as two main culprits (of blankly universalising principles) and we are rather paternalistically warned against animism (the unwitting handmaiden of metaphysics), wherein "wrapped in the covers of myth, vegetal life turns all the more numinous and obscure, so that its meanings are completely withdrawn, made unapparent and indiscernible, paving the way for the projection of human purposes and goals onto it".⁵⁰ Both of these critiques are grounded in a (valid) concern for the way that these seeming admissions of plant otherness as an undefined excessive vitality surreptitiously reabsorb it (as noumenal mystery), thus remaining complicit in an upholding of the structures of exclusion. However these descriptions do not fit well with the vitalist tradition within WHM, nor for that matter with the animisms of many other Indigenous cultures (with which

⁴⁸ 'Empathy', 264.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 263. Gruen anticipates and addresses this "narcissistic projection" category of objection, feeling that these dangers can be mitigated by a conscientious and sincere effort of getting to know: "[t]o accurately empathize, one must focus on and take account the specific context of the other, their idiosyncratic desires, and the processes that shaped those desires, their developmental and, in the case of non-sentient beings, their ecological and evolutionary histories, and their distinctive telos. This requires information, reflection, and understanding" (p. 33).

⁵⁰ *Plant Thinking*, pp. 33, 28.

Marder takes no care of distinction).⁵¹ Operating from a deeply world-embedded and relational position as we have seen, the vitalism of WHM serves praxis (not the other way around); foremost is the cultivation of relationship with plants, driven by a desire precisely to learn from and work with them in ways that amplify their particular characters and gifts as medicine (which purposes are acknowledged and owned as a baseline, and which medicine is a matter of plant meanings): it would not be helpful to shroud plant particularity with one's own projections.

Where herbalism is underpinned by a vitalist understanding, it is typical of its chiasmatic character that both the ontic and the ontological are held together within the relation. We find this sort of holding, for example, in the way that Carole Guyett seeks to connect with a more generalised 'Spirit' through the particularised 'spirits' of the plants that she connects with and honours in her plant diet ceremonies. Emphasis is upon attuning oneself to the unique character of whichever plant has been chosen as the focus of the ceremony - and this irreducible heterogeneity of character is regarded as a source of enjoyment and wonder in the work. But in recognising within the plants and this work a broad spiritual principle, she finds a greater framework of meaning within which these situated particularised encounters make sense to her in a more connected and coherent way. There is no sublimation happening here; the joy of ingesting blackberries is not erased by its interpretation within this greater context of meaning. Rather, the one (sensory, messy, tangible, joyous) encounter with (Bramble) 'spirits' is acknowledged as a means of approach towards the other (intangible, imparticular, more abstract) 'Spirit' - in the same way that empathy and metaphor both use a firm grounding within the familiar as a platform for approach towards the unfamiliar.

Secondly, feeling may be a human framework which finds no easy equivalent within

⁵¹ Hall, *Imagination*, p. xxvii.

plant being, but nonetheless, for very many plantworkers, this is a critical level upon which plant-human exchanges can be effected. Tuning in and 'listening' to feelings facilitates the kind of 'going down' into the material articulations of the body from the abstractions of linguistically structured thought, thus bringing perception closer to the level of physical exchange. When Nikki Darrell tells us that we might "work by feeling into the seeds, learning the song of the seeds, feeling what they need",⁵² she is instructing us to get out of our heads and lay aside our habits of projection in favour of an attuned listening. And perhaps it may not 'feel itself feel', but what has more depth than a seed?! And how better would we describe the way that plants enchant us if not through affective force and feeling? And that feeling is one of the ways that we can perceive the medicinal effects of plants is well accepted within evidence-based medicine as well as within traditional WHM, for example the validation of St John's Wort's traditional usage as a mood-affective herb by clinical research. In fact, these affects upon the level of feeling are an integral part of its medicine. Plants speak to us through feeling, and express themselves within us in ways that we feel, and it is through feeling that we might attune ourselves to them. "Plants easily connect through feelings" writes Carole Guyett. "Whatever you are feeling has an impact on the plants around you. If you approach them feeling love and gratitude, awe and wonder, they will certainly respond. These feelings cause your heart to open, and having an open heart is the easiest way I know to connect with plants".⁵³ Empathy already allows that we can never truly know the other and tries anyway. To delegitimize our efforts of 'feeling into' plants because plants "live without feeling" categorically excludes a fundamental relational possibility.

Marder's critique is deeply ethically motivated. He demands an ethical preservation of plant alterity, such that any plant encounters are necessarily constrained by a creed that will "maintain and nurture their otherness in the course of this

⁵² Darell, *Conversations*, p. 38

⁵³ Guyett, pp. 76-7.

encounter", seeking to end the long history of metaphysical violence (with ecocidal consequences) visited on plants within Western thinking.⁵⁴ And, as a philosopher, within the Western tradition, this is his concern (and perhaps, rightly, his burden). It is not, however, the concern of herbalists, for whom the cultivation of working relationships of intimate acquaintance already constitute a practical ethical challenge to culturally ingrained plant violence. And, moreover, whose working practices resonate with a traditional lineage of plantwork practice and knowledge that has itself suffered violent exclusion from the culture sanctioned by these paradigms and which has upheld relationship with the plant world in the midst of and in quiet challenge to their violence.⁵⁵ Theirs is not the philosophical project of hoping to "brush upon the edges of their being [...] and in so doing to grow past the fictitious shells of our identity and our existential ontology",⁵⁶ but rather that of finding ways to connect with "the plant as a mystery; as something that probably cannot ever be known, but that we can be in relationship with".⁵⁷ And yet, in fact, this 'growing past the fictitious shells of our identity' resonates deeply with the herbalist project of cultivating relationship with plants as living beings and allies, and also as teachers and guides (another aspect of plants' inexhaustible giving), who can open us onto truths of ourselves and of the world (and cosmos) that we share, sometimes leading us into the shadowed recesses of our own being, sometimes showing us macrocosmic visions of the vast web of being of which we are a part (or both at once, and the connections between them). To recognise plants as manifestations of Life and Spirit and as capable of offering us mirrors into our own being does not mean that we have to render ourselves unable to see the trees

⁵⁴ *Plant Thinking*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ This is not to ignore or erase the centrality of questions of violence within herbalist-plant relationships, which work of caring also integrally "requires decisions about whose bodies and lives to directly nourish and support, and whose to pay less attention to, or even, in the case of some plants, to kill so that others may thrive" (Boke, p. 55). Indeed, when asked about the responsibility that we have in engaging with plants and dangers of 'speaking for' Nathaniel Hughes identifies a self-reflexive grappling with our own capacities of violence as fundamental: "I think the issue is our violence. I think we have a responsibility to gradually learn about our own violence and the way in which we inflict it on other people in the world. [...] The starting point is that we are complicit."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Nathaniel Hughes.

for the wood; in fact precisely the opposite is true.

What Marder would like (recognising the historical cultural damage of such dynamics) is for us to avoid projecting anything of human experience onto plant alterity. Within the context of herbalist plant-relationships, projections (of which the projections of empathy are one manifestation, deployed in the service of connection) are understood as to some degree inevitable and a part of the process of acquaintance. It is questionably a relationship, or a meaningful one at least, when there is nothing we can relate to (which is why Marder's uncompromising emphasis on the preservation of radical alterity leads only to a '*desencontro*'). Nathaniel Hughes talks of the importance of recognising the projections that we inevitably bring to plantwork:

[...] Recognising it for what it is allows you to be open to the bigger 'what it is'. So [...] recognising that this picture of Nettle is just a picture of a Nettle means that you then have the space within you to go 'and who are you Nettle?' If you think the picture of the Nettle is the entirety of Nettle then you've come to a dead end within your own heuristic modeling [...] You've stopped yourself learning anything more; you stop yourself deepening that relationship, because you can't deepen a relationship with your own heuristic model. That's a dead end.

By contrast, acknowledging and owning these projections enables us to move through them. Recognising what we're bringing to the encounter allows us to see more clearly what it is that we are not bringing:

If we embrace and own our own projections, we not only learn about ourselves, but become able to see the plant at deeper and deeper levels. My experience is that we can always dive deeper, and always shed more layers of our own projection; projection which is also our often redundant armours. The more layers we move through, the more the true nature of the plant shines through.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Weeds in the Heart*, p. 26.

Hughes' account illuminates the way that the 'feeling into' - ourselves, and the plants that one is seeking to connect to - is not one-directional, but involves an exchange and an opening oneself up to; a hermeneutic approach by virtue of inwards analysis (which mutuality of relationship is reflected in herbalist forms of responsibility as discussed earlier). The point is to learn to own the things that one is bringing self-consciously, honestly and ethically, and not deny (or 'deposit') them. We have to work from within those frameworks that we ourselves inhabit - the 'all too human' - because that is where we find ourselves. In Hughes' formulation: "the big challenge is to stay in yourself but to also be in relationship".

For Hughes, this coming-into-relationship is, itself, the work of healing, and within his pedagogical practice, comprises "the whole training". Again, he conceives this relationship not as something to be constructed, but as an ontological ground; something deep and innate, to be 'dropped down' into:

For me, what I'm doing is revealing that relationship. But more than that because, in a way, revealing is like you could say that there's a conscious process of becoming conscious of it, but I'm not even sure that becoming conscious is the most important thing. I think becoming reciprocal is the most important thing. I think you can be in a reciprocal relationship with nature without being conscious of what you're doing. Of course, being conscious of it can lead you into an embracing of reciprocity, of which the thing we call 'gratitude' is an aspect of reciprocity. And that actually, that is just the nature of reality.

This relationship then, is not a negation of ontological and phenomenological difference, but, precisely what is given space to emerge of our already-entanglement by means of the loosening of our social identities. Again, it is a coming-into-alignment with what is already there; a dis-closing of the plant-ness already in ourselves - the being-ecological that has been obscured by our cultural social being. It is interesting to juxtapose Hughes' idea of 'becoming reciprocal' here with the 'revealing' of poetic disclosure that for Heidegger constitutes

ontological truth. Coming into ecological truth does not, for Hughes, necessitate the kind of disclosure that Heidegger associated with human language, but is a matter of right relation; a much more expansive, and deanthropocentred, conception. Hughes expresses our world-estrangement as cultural trauma; one that finds echo in our relationships with our own bodies as dissociation (“a thousand mini freeze responses”) from aspects of ourselves. Engaging with the plant - which “doesn't recognise our freeze response” but “speaks to us as a whole” - facilitates a realignment with these obscured and estranged parts of ourselves; thus for Hughes, the healing of the coming-into-relationship of plantwork encounters occurs at once on an individual, cultural and ecological level. Perhaps, in the end it is not so far from Marder's own conceptions of right relationship with plants, which he names 'vegetal democracy':

Like the plant-soul itself, consonant with life's hospitality, it stands for that which is most common and most inclusive, not by formally enveloping its contents but conversely by bringing into relief differences and divisions without which no “sharing,” no participation, no “being-with” is possible.

Perhaps the main difference, in fact, is that herbalist praxis offers more techniques for right relationship than philosophy; is more experienced in the navigations of holding together the differences of (human) self and (plant) other without sublimation.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism might seem to constitute an extreme iteration of the kind of determinative and dominating reading of the human into plant being - foreclosing particularity and denying alterity - that Marder warns against; precisely the attribution of human characteristics to non-human things (a classic philosophical 'fallacy'). However, anthropomorphism also manifests as a strategy of metaphoric

representation within human-plant relations in both traditional and contemporary plantwork (as well as, occasionally, its counterpart, physiomorphism, in which human experience is interpreted by virtue of the non-human).⁵⁹ Perhaps the most famous example of plant anthropomorphism in the Western herbal tradition is that of Mandrake (whose folk names included 'satan's apple' and 'devil's testicles') – a poisonous, narcotic and hallucinogenic plant of the *Solanaceae* family with strong magical associations - upon which folk mythology bestowed a literal human form. 'Mandrake men' and 'Mandrake women' (comprising the dried roots) were kept as talismans and considered to have their own whims and needs – as well as the capacity to emit unearthly and fatal screams when uprooted from the ground, such that sometimes dogs were designated to the task. An effect of this accordance of human attributes to the Mandrake was the sanctification and reverence of a plant that was of great importance within the medieval pharmacy.

Let's think back a minute to Elisabeth Brooke's instructions for meditative explorations with plants, in which she tells us to first "turn your eye inwards" and then to ask ourselves these questions: "[i]f this plant were a person, what kind of person would they be? What would their character be? How would they dress? How would they walk into a room? What would their energies be like?".⁶⁰ This process is something akin to a literary mechanism of characterisation. It is a deliberate thoughtful reading of human traits onto the plant as a mode of metaphoric re-expression of our embodied experience of it. Through personification, imaginative connections are created across difference, enabling a creative articulation of perceived qualities (for which our language lacks plant-appropriate words) thus anthropomorphism is used as an enabling strategy of approach and articulation. Gebhard, Nevers, and Billman-Mahecha find anthropomorphism as a tool of empathic connection across difference to be very prevalent in childrens'

⁵⁹ See for example Nikki Darrell's thoughts on 'Gardening as Metaphor' in *Conversations*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ *As Above*, p. 60.

mechanisms of apprehension of the natural world and they argue for it as a strategy of education to provide “a psychological foundation for deepening respect for nature”.⁶¹ The anthropomorphic identification of the non-human world with the self is, they contend, significant for human identity formation, as “at least part of the process by which the identity of human beings is formed involves making comparisons, assessing sameness and difference, distinguishing oneself from some things and people, and identifying with others”.⁶² Such comparative exploration allows us to explore the relational aspects of ourselves and in doing so to consolidate the boundaries of our own identities in ways appropriate to our position in the world and informative as to our own nature as humans within an ecology of living things:

Through anthropomorphic interpretation, an external object such as a tree or squirrel is perceived as being similar to oneself and humanlike in certain respects. The quality of being alive and the ability to feel pain are aspects frequently referred to in asserting such sameness. When both are placed in the same semantic category, the observer's knowledge about him- or her-self can be better employed to understand the non-human object, and features of the plant, animal or ecosystem can be drawn on to better understand oneself.

Thus the identity of both the object and the observer take shape.⁶³

We are reminded here of Abram's foundational assertion that “we are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not”.⁶⁴ Their claim is not only that reading relatable qualities into the natural world facilitates respect/empathy by enabling connection, but also that it aids in configuring the boundaries of difference that it crosses along lines that are determined through the encounter.

⁶¹ Ulrich Gebhard, Patricia Nevers and Elfriede Billman-Mahecha, 'Moralizing Trees: Anthropomorphism and Identity in Children's Relationships to Nature' in *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature* ed. by Susan Opatow and Susan Clayton (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2004) pp. 91-112 (p. 107).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶⁴ *Sensuous*, p. ix.

Something similar is argued by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*. Observing Darwin's anthropomorphising of his worms (as, like himself, intelligent and willful) to have "backfired" when the resultant scrutiny prompted "their own distinctive, material complexity" to come to the fore, she surmises that "[m]aybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman "environment""⁶⁵ The curiosity that the 'narcissism' of Darwin's worm-gaze fostered enabled, eventually, an appreciation and knowledge of their peculiar being beyond their self-same identity as 'worms'. Bennett concludes:

A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings - (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in "nature" and those in "culture," anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms.⁶⁶

This quote requires a little more care. Although she references the 'nature-culture' dualism, the categorical divides and ontological distinctions that Bennett's desire for parallels and connections seeks to surpass involve those between people and artefacts as much as it does people and worms. Within the theoretical context of 'vital materialism' that recognises the affective capacity of (what we might mistake to be inert) matter - "variously composed materialities that form confederations" - anthropomorphism is as justifiably employed to apprehend the vitality of a waffle iron as it is a worm.

Perhaps this is a glib example and a failure of imagination on my part. Iron (where, indeed, waffle irons are still made of iron) is a vibrant substance in many respects; it

⁶⁵ Bennett, pp. 99, 120.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

is “the chief constituent of the earth’s core” and “relatively plentiful in the sun”,⁶⁷ as well as being one of the seven metals of alchemy and an essential element in the production of our own blood. To some extent, herbalist practices, too, cross and blur these boundaries, as the ‘once-living’ character - to borrow Waddell’s term - of the plants continue to inform the workings of the (bottled and shelf-stored, perhaps) remedy that it becomes, and these same preparations are also used for purposes of ‘meeting’ plants.⁶⁸ Herbal remedies are exemplary vibrant matter, crafted for their affective power (“I have always been drawn to fresh plant preparations” writes Christopher Hedley; “[i]t seems to me the best way to capture the innate vitality of the herb”).⁶⁹ However, the concept of once-living-ness also upholds some critical differentiations; between the plant as it was when rooted and growing in the soil and as it persists in remedy form, and between living and non-living things;⁷⁰ the vitalism of herbalism does not extend as far in its reach as that of new materialism. Indeed, the question might well be asked why it is that philosophy seemed to bypass plant-being entirely in its jump from the inclusion of animals (as agential and ‘vital’) within its scope of consideration to an all-encompassing and indistinct category of ‘matter’. An answer to which question might be intimated in discovering that the term ‘matter’ itself, from the Latin *materia*, is etymologically connected to trees, indicating wood as something archetypally enduring and substantial.⁷¹ It is the living bodies of trees that constitute archetypal matter in the original sense of the word, and yet we tend to consider matter via the lens of those of its least living instantiations - the inorganic, the synthesised and the manufactured (and thus it

⁶⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, *Iron*, Encyclopedia Britannica (22 Dec 2020) <<https://www.britannica.com/science/iron-chemical-element>> [accessed 2 June 2021].

⁶⁸ And, in fact, plants themselves blur these boundaries as the question of when a plant is no longer alive is not always so clear-cut; as I write the two-days uprooted Jack-by-the-Hedge by the window has turned its flowering tips towards the sun.

⁶⁹ Also asserting that “herbs and medicines made from them carry the feelings of the place they are grown in and of the people who pick and process them”. Christopher Hedley, *Why I Prefer Fresh Plant Tinctures: Four Reasons*, Rutland Biodynamics (2011) <<https://rutlandbio.com/why-i-prefer-fresh-plant-tinctures-four-reasons-by-christopher-hedley-ahg-april-2011>> [accessed 2 Mar 2021].

⁷⁰ Although certainly, not all herbalists would subscribe to this particular differentiation.

⁷¹ A point noted by Laura Pustarfi, who finds similar connections in the Latin *silva* and Greek *hyle*, also discovering the word ‘tree’ to derive from the same root as “words such as betroth, duration, duress, endure, true, and trust, as well as the Greek *dendro-*”, which words “imply a steadfastness over time and show the phenomenal sense of the hardness and stability of the body of a tree” (Pustarfi, ‘Arboreality’, p. 68).

comes to symbolise inertia). But even plastics and polystyrene derive from naturally occurring materials and 'matter' exists along a spectrum of natural occurrence and anthropocentrically reconfigured artificiality (or maybe 'artefactuality'). And to choose to reclaim and rekindle its affectivity from amongst those of its least living forms seems to echo a comfortable 'at homeness' within the world of objects and materially reflected human meanings.

Vital materialism, in reinscribing humans within a landscape of affective matter, intends, ostensibly, to overcome the hubris and associated disenchantment and destruction of human exceptionalism (facilitated by the dualisms of culture/nature; subject/object; human/non-human),⁷² and thus it would seem to share some common analyses and aims with those of this project (and poetic plantwork practices as this project conceives them). But in collapsing ontological distinction and foregrounding matter over meaning, it too seems (again, recalling Plumwood's words) to take with one hand what it gives with another, as the 'all too human' (which is to say overtly, recognisably human) elements of our factual, situated selfhood are rendered peripheral and those political and ethical responsibilities that pertain to the specifics of our contextual embeddedness sidestepped. Val Plumwood also sought to respond in her work to the entrenched ideologies of human exceptionalism (which she sees as having, following Darwin, "shifted [...] ground, from body to mind").⁷³ For her, it is precisely the adoption of a self-reflexive, intentional, thoughtfully responsible 'stance' towards non-human others that offers answer to this. She observes that "the recognition of others as mindful and communicative beings is never purely an empirical or observational matter, but is always already an action of exchange or refusal of exchange, a matter of stance and performativity [...] a matter of listening and invitation".⁷⁴ For both

⁷² Bennett, p. 34.

⁷³ Val Plumwood, 'Human Exceptionalism and the Limitations of Animals: a review of Raimond Gaita's 'The Philosopher's Dog'', *Australian Humanities Review*, 42 (2007) <<http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2007/08/01/human-exceptionalism-and-the-limitations-of-animals-a-review-of-raimond-gaitas-the-philosophers-dog/>> (n.p.) [accessed 2 Nov 2020].

⁷⁴ *Ibid* (n.p.).

Plumwood and Bennett, approach is central, but for Plumwood (as well as myself), what justifies the approach is its political and ethical potentialities, and that requires a staying grounded in the (culturally specific, 'all too') human.

In this regard, the adoption of a thoughtfully anthropomorphising stance might enact an invitation of exchange, in contrast to those equally performative (and political) sceptical approaches which enact a refusal of exchange. Our capacity to choose between these illuminates the way that each approach makes sense within (and upholds) contextual "ideological background conditions", which in the case of performative 'common-sense' scepticism, are those of culturally entrenched human exceptionalism, "an obdurate reductionism that resists recognising mind-like qualities" in living others.⁷⁵ Eileen Crist's identification of an ingrained and invisibilised 'mechanomorphism' as characteristic of relations to the natural world further illuminates the way in which this 'common-sense' scepticism is not only rooted in scepticism, but also quietly upholds it.⁷⁶ In this way, intentional anthropomorphism can be understood as an alternative, ethically-concerned stance; both are performative, political, and world-making, but they are each grounded in and uphold different 'background assumptions'. Anthropomorphism, then, is a fallacy (and mechanomorphism the hidden norm) from the perspective of a contextual human exceptionalism, where humans and non-humans are radically separate. Where continuity is premised, intentional anthropomorphism can serve to highlight connection; if utilised in certain ways, it is an appropriate tool for an ecological understanding of life. Plumwood's account (in this instance) is premised in mind-continuity between humans and animals; Bennett's in matter-continuity between people and (all) things (thus attempting to circumvent the operations of

⁷⁵ Ibid. (n.p.). Matthew Hall also echoes this understanding in his critique of zoocentrism within Western thought: "[z]oocentrism is a *method* for achieving the exclusion of plants from relationships of moral consideration. For want of a better term, it is a *political* tool in an exclusionary process [... which] helps to maintain human notions of superiority over the plant kingdom in order that plants may be dominated. It is a crucial dualising force, responsible for depicting plants as inferior beings and as the natural base of a human-dominated hierarchy" (*Persons*, p. 6).

⁷⁶ Eileen Crist, *Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

mind in connection). Plantwork practices, as I have sought to characterise them here, sit somewhere between them, premising materially-grounded-mind continuity between humans and plants as living things (across other emergent, very significant differences). Intentional anthropomorphism within this context enacts these ideologies. And, importantly, this acknowledgement of difference is integrally upheld within the movement of anthropomorphic projection in plantwork, as these projections are consciously and self-reflexively owned.

This is visible in conversation with herbalists in the frequent use of words, or the referencing of qualities and characteristics, that typically pertain to the human, in tandem with a pronounced caution. Clare Holohan uses the term 'who' rather than 'what', but explains this as a function of the paucity of language rather than indicating a perception of plants as people:

I don't see plants as people as such. I feel like they're [...] really different to people. But I feel that the way the English language has evolved [...] I don't know that we have the words to be able to describe things in a way that [...] isn't human. But I don't necessarily think that's right either.

She recognises the potential value in "people using that kind of language or humanising parts of the natural world" in that it perhaps helps engender respect "because it makes it more like humans", but qualifies this "in the same breath" with the concern that it's also "a bit dangerous to think that everything is like humans because it probably misses some of the [...] key differences". She draws the line at the practice of attributing gender to plants - "it just doesn't sit well with me and so definitely that's a thing that I try not to do" - and would like to try to find language that is more fitting for plant particularity, but gives herself some slack in acknowledging the difficulties "when you just live in such a human-centric culture and [you're] trying to explain [...] to other humans!". Cristina Cromer identifies her realisation that plants like to be approached "as if they are people" as a revelation.

However, she also recounts being charged with anthropomorphism as an accusation, and responds with recognition of the constrictions of her human-particular positioning:

It did give me pause for thought, and I spent a little while thinking about it. But it quickly became clear to me that I'm not anthropomorphising the plants. What I'm doing is I'm *necessarily* filtering my experience through my own humanity. I *have* to express things through the filter of being human, because that's what I am. And I'm sure the plants are doing similarly. They're encountering us within the context of their own understanding. Being plants. Who knows what we look like to them, really. I'm sure we look very fast, we move incredibly fast for them.

Both of these responses acknowledge clearly the impossibility of abandoning entirely one's own frameworks of interpretation and modes of expression. Yet without recourse to human qualities or elements of thought and expression, it would be impossible to begin to accommodate within understanding (the fact of) the subjective experiences of non-human others; or to articulate them in terms understandable by human others.

Anthropomorphism certainly carries risks of the kinds of anthropocentrism that Marder so fervently tries to avoid, blurring important ontological boundaries and reading our own projections back as a more independent form of reality (medieval habits of giving Mandrake men or women regular milk or wine baths and feeding them specific foods, might be conceived from a modern perspective to have crossed this line). And yet to attempt to abandon the culturally determined human within our language and frameworks of perception entirely would exclude possibilities of connection, stifle articulation, and probably constitute denialism or delusion as regards our own implicated positions and identities. More relevant is the relationship that we choose to have with our own projections, and within a context of committed self-reflexivity, anthropomorphism is just one form of (self-)projection

amongst others. Moreover, it is a strategic one that - making creative efforts of imaginative understanding to try to get a feeling for the ways that plants experience the world differently from ourselves and perhaps finding ways to in-habit (for a time) their experiential logics - helps us (in allowing us to play with, emphasise and amplify different relational aspects of ourselves) to recognise our own being as constitutively relational. And, more than that, to recognise the relationships that we are. Learning how to engage well with plants is a matter of cultivating skills; developing the experiential know-how to deploy the tools that we use with competence and care.

A care-ful and attentive responsibility in owning one's own projections - anthropomorphising and otherwise - is fundamental to this, and the same is true as regards our articulations, for example in the choice and use of metaphors. I was struck, in hearing Cristina Cromer's characterisation of the immune system as a toddler (with simple needs requiring immediate attention and fulfilment; an inquisitiveness towards the external world; a strong self-absorption and self-identity; blunt honesty with no cultural or social consideration or understanding; and a strong need for nurturance and care), by the stark contrast that this poses with the more usual metaphors of war and defence, and the different kinds of regard that it invokes. She also often uses the metaphor of a 'beloved child' for the body ("if you were walking with a beloved child and the child said, "I have a stone in my shoe" you wouldn't say "tough luck keep walking!") as it gives her patients "permission... to love their body as much as they would a child". The metaphors by which we choose to articulate things (in these cases the body, but also plant-others) affect how we regard and relate them.⁷⁷ Moreover, in choosing our own metaphors, owning our own projections, recognising - or deploying intentionally - our

⁷⁷ For example, Londa Schiebinger shows how the use of gender in Linnaean taxonomic terminology "imported into botany traditional notions about sexual hierachy" (despite most flowers being hermaphroditic), whilst its sexual classification "gave undue primacy to sexual reproduction and heterosexuality" with Linnaeus' texts "filled with tender embraces of duly wedded couples". Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; 2004) pp. 13, 22, 22.

anthropomorphisms, we decrease the influence of those culturally determined and inherited stories, frameworks and filters (the human exceptionalism; the mechanomorphism) that we bring unthinkingly to the encounter. We create our own stories and engender other modes of relationship. The practices of care-fully choosing and creating one's own metaphors, owning them as projections in the movement of thoughtful approach, dis-covering and disentangling these from within the encounters by virtue of attentive self-reflexive interpretation, enables plantworkers to take control of, and ethical responsibility for, the filters through which their plant interlocutors are (always, necessarily) encountered; the interpretative baggage that they bring.

Material Metaphors and the Doctrine of Signatures

Within language, metaphor creates connections between different items - the referents of words - facilitating our understanding of them, often invoking feeling. The complementary practice of empathy does something similar between ourselves and other people or other living beings. Within many of the traditional customs pertaining to plants in Britain and Ireland, we find something similar happening on the level of materiality and culture. Metaphor was used as a connective bridge between the different orders of existence that comprised the spheres of influence of people's lives; often less tangible, ineffable or invisible elements of the world were made more accessible through their figuration in physical form. For example, the harvest ritual crafting of corn dolls from wheat sheafs as a place wherein which the crop spirits (upon which the harvest relied) could reside during the winter months, or the material figuration of illness in spells and charms, made possible a functional relation to aspects of existence which people considered to have tangible affective impact upon their lives but would be unapproachable on their own terms. Another example is that of 'The Goodman's Croft', a practice widespread in sixteenth and

seventeenth century Scotland and resonant with practices elsewhere, constituting “a piece of cultivable land which is left untilled in order to devote it to a supernatural being”.⁷⁸ A contemporary upholder of the practice offers analysis:

The Gudeman’s Croft creates a physical locus for that which is Other. The important consideration here is that it is entirely Other. [...] To think of it as one’s own personal patch of ‘spiritual wilderness’, defeats the purpose of it and it’s dedication to the Devil is a reminder of the tabu placed around that land. [...] Related to this in spirit is the practice of not harvesting anything left in the fields after Sauin. Traditionally, as of that night anything remaining was considered blighted by the Devil. This practice accomplishes temporally what the Gudeman’s Croft accomplishes spatially. It sets temporal limits on what we humans can take from the Land, teaching us that we cannot take and endlessly take until nothing remains.⁷⁹

This boundarying of the land and of the harvesting season created metaphors, within the calendar and within the land itself, for the influence of the spirit worlds, creating connection between tangible and intangible reality - an “interface between the human and the divine”.⁸⁰ And the figures of the spirit world themselves - the taboos signified here by the Devil - as illuminated by this contemporary uptake, could in turn figure important truths about human social and ecological relations.

These kinds of culturally informed material metaphor find their iterations within contemporary herbalist practice. Clare Holohan describes the significance of the layout of her herb garden:

The top of the garden is in the North which represents Winter and cold - so you've got all the cooling herbs at the top; and then all the warming herbs in the South at the bottom; and then the West side of the garden is all the moist herbs and the East side is all the drying

⁷⁸ Emily Lyle, ‘The Good Man’s Croft’, *Scottish Studies*, 36 (2013), 103-124 <<https://doi.org/10.2218/ss.v36.2707>> (103 and 112).

⁷⁹ Manx Wytch, *The Gudeman’s Croft and the Blighting of the Fields*, (2015) <<https://manxwytch.wordpress.com/2015/09/04/the-gudemans-croft-and-the-blighting-of-the-fields>> [accessed 5 May 2019].

⁸⁰ Lyle, p. 112.

herbs.

This scheme takes account of the “traditional energetic associations” of the herbs that she cultivates (cool; moist; warm; dry), figuring these by virtue of their positionality in the garden as regards the cardinal direction to which they correspond. The arrangement of the garden in this way allows her to see these qualities of the herbs emphasised and amplified in their re-presentation in topographic form. The correspondences expressed here are largely symbolic - the Northern part of the land, representing the season of Winter, representing coldness, representing the cooling qualities of the herb (her logic is not that the Northern section of the land is physically colder and would thus better accommodate cooling herbs in that regard). However, where metaphor manifests in material (or other kinds of non-linguistic ways), creating relationship between discrete elements of reality or of experience, these relationships frequently also contain something ‘real’. Here I venture (in answer to the question asked near the start of this chapter) that part of the reason metaphor accords so well with plantwork, is that plants themselves re-present elements of their being in this way, or rather elements of their being are reiterated, and amplified, upon different levels. Another way of saying this might be that the ways that plant communications resemble, when approached from within our own conceptual schemas, the function of metaphor. And in this way, by becoming attuned to - curious about and attentive towards - these representations, we can learn to ‘read’ them.

Cristina Cromer tells a story about the development of her acquaintance with Poke Root as a medicine. Staying in a small village on a peninsular near Mount Olympus in Greece, she would walk every day to the North side of the peninsular - whose bioclimate is “cool and damp” on account of the meltwater coming off the mountains - to fetch limestone-filtered water from a spring.

Every day, I would go from where we were staying and walk through the village to the spring

and fill bottles. [...] And I really loved seeing these enormous Poke plants - have you ever seen them?! They're large, stately plants. And one afternoon I suddenly thought 'I'm getting a feeling that these Poke plants, where they're positioned is meaningful!' So after that, each day I would walk with this question in mind. What is the Poke telling me? And I realised, by following the line of the wells through people's back gardens, kind of mapping it - going up above the land, mapping it down to the spring - I realised that the wells would follow the waterway... I could sort of see that. And I was thinking "why?... why is the Poke here... and here, and here?! And I realised that the Poke was at the point where the waterway changed direction; returned a corner or went through some part of the rock where there was some kind of restriction. And I thought 'it's node medicine, isn't it?! Of course it is! It's lymphatic node medicine. And the Poke is growing where the nodes are.'

She tells this story as an illustration of 'the Doctrine of Signatures', a schema of plant understanding formulated as such by Paracelsus (although surely with a long tradition as an unnamed practice) and in much use within the later medieval period, in which it was held that medicinal plants frequently represented something of their medicinal virtues (their non-visible 'essence') on the level of appearance. Outwith (and considerably within) herbalism, it has been much ridiculed and disavowed, held to epitomise the 'mumbo jumbo' of traditional (or sometimes, by implication, all) forms of herbal practice; more charitable treatments sometimes defending its usage as mnemonic rather than indicative.⁸¹ But for Cromer, its "like a language that we can share information" across the barriers of species:

Because [...] the plant isn't making this information available through a story; it *is* the story. Poke wasn't saying to me, "ahem, excuse me... the story is that I'm standing where the node is!" It just *is* where the node is. And it takes human knowledge-harvesting and synthesis of information to make the story, and then we can share that story by talking about the Doctrine of Signatures.

The Poke Root's affinity for 'nodes' within waterways manifests itself both on the

⁸¹ For example, Bradley C. Bennett, 'Doctrine of Signatures: An Explanation of Medicinal Plant Discovery or Dissemination of Knowledge?', *Economic Botany*, 61: 3 (2007), pp. 246–55; Hatfield, *Memory*, pp. 141-2.

level of its expression in the body as a lymph medicine, and also on the level of its topographical distribution - along the subterranean water channels. It is not that Poke Root is addressing us in metaphors here - the Poke Root 'just is'. In Cromer's words, "it is the story". The Poke Root amplifies the patterning of the waterways within the land in its own spatial-geographical expression, and this is an expression of one of its meanings - its 'aboutness'; it is 'about' nodes - which meaning and aboutness is also reflected within its constituents and energetics; in the 'who' that it is. And this being-about-nodes - its meaning - is what it brings to and re-expresses within our bodies as medicine. A framework of metaphor, whose function is to draw connections of resonance across difference, enables us to recognise this, noticing these similarities and resonances and accommodating them as significant. Metaphor helps us to understand plants' self-expressions, or self-representations because of the ways that they occur as reiterations and amplifications of who and how that plant is within different contexts or relations. It helps us to 'see' something of the perspective, to understand something of the logics of the plant; to 'hear' what it has to 'say', and to understand it as meaningful. Metaphor accords so well with plantwork because plants themselves express themselves in ways that accord with metaphor.

Nikki Darrell recounts an encounter with Bilberry in which this realisation becomes clear for her:

One day, I was out in the garden, musing on what the energetics of bilberry and blueberry were so I started listening to the plants here and asked them what they do on that level, and the reply was: help you see in the dark. I was about to say that I know that is what they do physically when I had a double or triple aha moment; they help us to see in the long dark night of the soul too, and secondly that the physical effects describe the energetic effects and thirdly that a significant encounter with bilberries in the wild was on a ritual walk with a friend and my kids after my father had died. A few months after the conversation with the plants in the garden, the same friend (who happens to be a psychologist) sent me a paper

about blueberry and its value in treating PTSD [...] the plant helps us to digest the information that comes in at those times of soul searching and intensive interior work.⁸²

These resonances between the different expressions of Bilberry's virtues is a function of the fact that plants have particular for-themselves meanings, just as we do; that they are beings-towards-ends, with their own purposes and ways of moving through life, just as we are. That bilberries help us to see in the dark by improving vascular function in the eyes, and also 'help us see in the dark' in figurative terms, reflects aspects of the plant's for-itself being; its meanings, expressing themselves in different contexts. Each of these is a different expression of something inherent and integral about Bilberry; the same meanings of Bilberry, put into play in different ways.⁸³ The metaphor of 'seeing in the dark' draws this connection; it is a way of trying to express a less easily articulable concept by means of a more tangible one. Christopher Hedley and Non Shaw pick up on this characteristic when they explain the concept of herbal 'virtues':

The 'virtues' of a herb are its strengths and qualities; its inner potency, expressions of its vital spirit, and of the way it is in the world. The way a herb is in the world will inform it of the way to be in your body. We prefer this term to the more modern 'uses'. Herbs do not have uses. They have themselves and their own purposes.⁸⁴

Cristina Cromer also expresses this when she describes the Doctrine of Signatures as "another way of telling the story", where (in the same way that the patient arrives to her clinic with a 'tapestry' to be unravelled) the plants themselves "embody the stories". She muses:

The *Phytolacca* [Poke Root] doesn't know, or care, that we have lymph nodes. But if it were

⁸² *Conversations*, pp. 266-7.

⁸³ Or looking at it from another perspective (that of our optical/vascular apparatus, and that of our emotional being), perhaps these are different 'readings'; the meanings of Bilberry interacting with different interpretations; the same meanings coming into contact with the diverse meanings that we ourselves bring to the encounter.

⁸⁴ Hedley and Shaw, p. xxiii.

feasible in some way for me to somehow transmit the information about lymph nodes to *Phytolacca* it would probably recognise what I'm saying. Because it has its version of understanding about standing where the waterways change direction.

For now, she wonders if the daisies, which open and close their petals in response to the emergence and disappearance of the sun, might somehow pick up on her opening and closing her eyes as she imagines what it might feel like for them.

6.2 Language that Matters

Metaphor, then, when it is used well, supports us to put the language that shapes our thought and material realities in service of a stance of ethical intentional recognition towards the living world, amplifying resonance across difference. It helps us to both better perceive and to better articulate plant realities which nevertheless remain beyond full comprehension, staying grounded within our situated, subjective, familiar 'human' thought-language, whilst self-reflexively creating space for imaginative and affective resonance. This self-reflexive aspect of metaphor's projections we have seen to be critical within plantwork practices, mitigating risks of narcissism and enabling the plant to 'shine through'. Moreover, the question of why metaphor accords well with plantwork was answered with reference to the ways that plants express themselves, with the Doctrine of Signatures exemplifying the way that a framework of metaphor is used within plantwork to 'read' plant self-communications. This next section will explore this proximity of poetic language to plant expressions and the communicative flows of the living world, and the ways that herbalists use poetic forms of language (and poetic ways of being-towards) to engender proximity.

The Roots of Language

Part of the appeal of metaphor in language is that it imbues it with feeling and imagination. This is one of the ways that poetic language excels. To understand language involves a creative interpretative action that pulls sense from its codification in (spoken, or moreso; written) words into the dynamic presence of relationship,⁸⁵ but this animation, deeply ingrained within our cultural habits, is so ordinary as to be mundane. Historically, the writing and reading of texts were activities that involved power and privilege, but the revolutionary social impact of the printing press in popularising access to the written word is obscured by today's technologies of digital media and a seemingly endless proliferation of digitally reproducible words in our lives. Amidst this abundance and mundanity, it perhaps feels strange to talk of our relationship to words as 'animating' within the context of considerations of 'animism'. Bringing textually encoded words to life is not, for the most part, a practice of enchantment; it is a banal element of our everyday realities that is as much about ingredients lists and roadsigns as it is about ontological (or ecological) interconnection.

Rediscovering something of the expressive sharing gestures that underlie and animate everyday language is one way that we cast light on our habitual (human) modes of world-being, holding the thought-language framework that is our element up to the light and making it strange again. And, as we saw in chapter four, this defamiliarisation of language gives us an entry point to being able to work within and through it to trace a commonality and continuity with plant others. Our language is able for this because it is, itself, grounded in flows of communicative exchange that we share with plants. The kind of language that we tend to use is a complex emergent phenomenon; which emergence traces paths of increasing abstraction. It is highly symbolic, self-referential, cognitive and conventionalised. But it also retains a connection to those of its foundational expressive functions that

⁸⁵ Gadamer, *Truth*, p. 156, Abram, p. 131.

are characteristic of the communicative exchanges of life beyond the human, and sometimes we can trace this thread back through our own language to its ecological foundations. That is, we can re-root abstract language in the communicative flows of the living world that are its ground and fundamental essence.

The field of biosemiotics offers us an account of the lineage of emergent linguistic complexity as rooted biological processes, emphasising semiotic processes as fundamental events, and signs and meaning as the basis of life.⁸⁶ That it perceives the circulation of sign processes as fundamental to and characteristic of life, and therefore as a thing-in-common across the spectrum of living things, offers (as yet underexplored) insight for plant scholarship.⁸⁷ However, the practical potentialities of this fact for human cultivation of beyond-the-human relationships is explored by Kohn in *How Forests Think*. For Kohn, the expressive motion of self-re-presentation through sign creation, and the capacity to interpret these, connects us, as human living things, to all other living things, and is the foundation for all of our more peculiarly human emergent processes. In attending to these basic levels of semiosis in which our own more abstract thought-language habits are grounded, we are able, in terms of capacity at least, to acknowledge and sometimes understand the re-presentative output of other living things: “[t]hanks to the ways in which language is nested in broader forms of representation that have their own distinctive properties, we are, in fact, open to the emerging worlds around us”.⁸⁸

On this understanding, the vital processes of semiosis are the fabric of life. The vibrant exchange of signs - the endless fluid interchange of semiotic projection and interpretation - constitutes something like a dynamic ecological baseline of living thoughts from which the more complex assemblages of selves and minds emerge.

⁸⁶ Barbieri, *Introduction*, p. xi.

⁸⁷ Ryan, ‘Passive’, p. 111.

⁸⁸ Kohn, pp. 9, 15.

These selves - of which humans are one kind - participate in a shared world that courses with endless free-flowing undercurrents of meaning. This endless interactive complexity is explicitly held in view in the lifeworld of the Ávila Runa with whom Kohn works:

All life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive. In important ways, then, life and thought are one and the same: life thinks; thoughts are alive. This has implications for understanding who "we" are. Wherever there are "living thoughts" there is also a "self." "Self," at its most basic level, is a product of semiosis. It is the locus - however rudimentary and ephemeral - of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a "some-one" who emerges as such as a result of this process. The world is thus "animate." "We" are not the only kind of we. The world is also "enchanted." Thanks to this living semiotic dynamic, *mean-ing* (i.e., means-ends relations, significance, "aboutness," *telos*) is a constitutive feature of the world and not just something we humans impose on it. Appreciating life and thought in this manner changes our understanding of what selves are and how they emerge, dissolve, and also merge into new kinds of we as they interact with the other beings that make the tropical forest their home in that complex web of relations that I call an "ecology of selves."

Again, then, it is because of the ways that human thinking linguistic modes of being are, in fact, highly abstracted emergent forms of non-human thinking and signing and *mean-ing*, that humans whose lives are linguistically structured nonetheless "can think beyond the human". The forest-dwelling lives of the Ávila Runa within which context Kohn gains his insights are culturally structured around this interactivity. Their habits support participation in this 'ecology of selves' and their language retains elements of iconic semiosis, which signs relate directly to and resemble the material world that they describe (such as the sound-word *tsupu*, whose meaning referent - "an entity as it makes contact with and then penetrates a body of water" - corresponds to its sensual feeling aspect).⁸⁹ These cultural traits accord with their own self-conception as participants within the web of living

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 16, 22, 27.

relations of the forest - a thoroughly de-anthropocentric picture in which humans can be as much prey as predator (which more even distribution of power across species makes gaining power a frequent objective of interspecies relations).

EuroWestern cultural paradigms obscure this ecological interactivity. The anthropocentric cosmologies that they serve disenchant the world, object-ifying all non-human living beings as non-selves (the silenced and subordinated 'others' in the nature-culture binary). Whilst our language does, as Nancy Baker points out, retain something of the capacity for speaking about other than human beings as living selves with whom we share our world, it is latent and subdued - tending to erupt in non-conscious habitual usage, but hidden in our understanding of how language works. If we want to re-purpose our language towards a recognition of the ecological underpinnings of life, we need to develop different modes of talking, of apprehending, of listening, that are appropriate for more-than-human as well as human connection. As plant communications tend to be much more physical in character than our own (chemical, gestural, electrical etc.), if we are seeking to develop our languages for communicative exchange with plants then re-accessing and amplifying the embodied physical elements within it makes sense. To redevelop languages that are rooted in the land, and in our exchanges with the living world around us, makes sense. This is a matter of re-rooting our language in presence - in the sensory and the symbiotic real. It is also, perhaps, a matter of re-rooting herbalism in its own traditions, putting academic thinking in the service of the world. In the words of feminist scholar Adrienne Rich:

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction. [...] Long before the nineteenth century, the empirical witch of the European Middle Ages, trusting her senses, practicing her tried remedies against the anti-material, anti-sensuous, anti-empirical dogmas of the Church. Dying for that, by the millions. [...] A rebellion against the idolatry of pure ideas, the belief that ideas have a life of their own and float along above the heads of ordinary people - women, the poor, the uninitiated.

Abstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans.

Theory - the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees - theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth.

It is a matter of returning our language, our theory, our thinking, our praxis to the soil from which they have arisen. 'If it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth'.⁹⁰

Putting Weight into Words

To recap then, Kohn's analysis of language, as informed by Ávila Runa ecological inter-relationships and Piercean semiotics, understood it to be an emergent phenomenon with its roots in practices of sign production and representation - the constituents of thought - that are common to all of the rest of the living world. Although grounded in a different theoretical lineage, this is not too far from David Abram's characterisation of language as having arisen in relationship with the 'animate landscape' and mind as a function of the 'breathing earth' (as informed by numerous diverse Indigenous cosmologies, and phenomenology).⁹¹ Both writers keep an eye oriented towards a realignment with this fundamental ground in-common; Kohn in his 'anthropology beyond the human', and Abram in his 'craft' of "releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves".⁹² Robin Wall Kimmerer, too, inspired by the Potawatomi language that "reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world", calls for the development of a 'grammar of animacy', that "could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world [...] with moral responsibility

⁹⁰ See, too, Abram, *Sensuous*, for an iteration of the arguments of this section that draws on a phenomenological philosophical (as well as a diverse Indigenous cultural/theoretical) lineage.

⁹¹ Abram, p. 263.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species".⁹³ Which is to say that, despite the habituated estrangement of our (linguistically informed) cultural paradigms, we can learn to work *through* our language and thought frameworks towards this common ground, creating space within them and opening them up to the exchanges of the living world.⁹⁴

Deanthropocentrising our language means working to divest it of its unconscious social determinations and re-rooting it in this shared strata of fundamental exchange. Nathaniel Hughes reiterates this point:

That's the opportunity, is 'can we move towards a language where every word is the doorway?' As opposed to a language, where, say, worst case, the words are a stamp of the colonised self; of ownership. And you can feel the difference. They could even be the same words... this is what's interesting! They could be the same word said in a different way. But you know it, you feel it in your heart... one word just opens the doorway to like 'wow!' and the other one feels like an impression. Yeah, so let's go for the ones that go 'wow'!

So how do we go about this task of reinvesting words with - opening them to - the colour and vibrancy of plant expressiveness? How to work through them to discover and make room for those originary forms of exchange that ground them? How to trace these threads back, to re-root them once more in an ecological reality? How to cut through the proliferate gratuity of those words that are a constant background buzz to our existence - the white noise - to empower them with the force of living relation? How to recognise, accommodate and articulate the infinitely diverse complexity of living language within the narrow codifications of our own?

There are many ways that this question might be answered.⁹⁵ This project has taken up just one strand of potential response: the potentialities of a poetic approach,

⁹³ *Sweetgrass*, p. 58.

⁹⁴ The idea of 'plant writing', expounded by Marder and Irigaray in *Through Vegetal Being* also resonates with this conception, as does Vieira's *phytographia*.

⁹⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'Notes towards a Politics of Location (1984)' in Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979 - 1985* (New York: Norton, 1994), pp. 210 - 231 (p. 213).

which potentialities can be most easily recognised in the familiar way that poetry, as a medium of artistic production, takes up and works with language; but which are most interesting to us in the deeper philosophical sense of the poetic as a form of production that pertains not only to poems, but to anything our experience of which is determined by the constructions of the language-thought-habit nexus that mediates our world relations.⁹⁶ "Authentic language, which has not lost its magic potency by being used up and abused, is poetry" writes Hofstadter of Heidegger's thought, which might also be well characterised as seeking to 'move towards a language where every word is a doorway'.⁹⁷ Within herbalist praxis, both language and (linguistically-structured) thought are frequently put into the service of connection with plants; of ecological circulation rather than (socially determined) selfhood and ownership; of the vibrancy and magic of discovery.

We've already considered some aspects of the way that poetic language - or more accurately, a poetic uptake of language - accords well with the perception and articulation of plant being, drawing particularly on phenomenological understanding. The poetic word was recognised as integrally sensual; with a thickness and a weight to it that habitual language does not have, such that our encounters with poetic words are both thoughtful and feeling at once, and this double-ness (the double meaning of 'sense') was understood to be a function of the way that poetic words engage us on each of these levels. This engagingness - the appeal of poetry; its enthralling quality - was understood as characteristic. Unlike our everyday speech which serves functions of communicating intended meanings, poetic words are much more free to question their relationship to linguistic and meaning conventions, and this means that they are, much more than everyday

⁹⁶ Which is to say as a mode of world-being that dis-closes, by way of this situated relationship. Heidegger characterises this as the poetic being that is authentic to us: "[f]or dwelling can be unpoetic only because it is in essence poetic. For a man to be blind, he must remain a being by nature endowed with sight. A piece of wood can never go blind" ('Poetically', *Poetry*, p. 225). This analogy is obviously problematic, but we might note a parallel here with the idea of 'plant blindness', as a distancing from the plant-entangled being that is our ecological being.

⁹⁷ Hofstadter, 'Introduction' to *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. xii. Heidegger himself writes: "everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer" ('Language', *Poetry*, p. 205).

language, re-made anew in the encounter every time. Ambiguous and brimming with potential, poetic words solicit our interpretation. In remaking poetic words within the bounds of the engagement, our mind-knowing and our body-knowing collaborate in the work of 'making sense'. As such, poetry engages us as more complete beings. We enchant poetic words and bring them to life - and poetry does the same to us. Recast, then, within the light of language as a fundamentally ecological phenomenon, the poetic is a means by which language might be opened to those manifold discourses of the living world that ground it. To the presence of the re-presentation of the world.

Material Language: Plant-talk, Body-talk

What might be characterised as 'poetic' herbal practices then, are those which aim to work through the structures of the existent to dis-cover the communicative self-expressions of plants. Within herbalism, language is often taken up to these ends, but more often it is thought that is put into the service of, or put in touch with, those fundamental expressive flows wherein communicative exchanges with plants become possible. Earlier I referenced the construction of 'body stories' by CAM practitioners, in which "the body emerges as a 'communicator' with agency not subsumed by or reduced to a mind-directed agency".⁹⁸ The body tells the story of its own sickness and, through skilled attunement and the asking of questions, the practitioner helps the patient to listen and give voice to its articulations, translating them into (shareable) language. Within herbalist practice, the skills of listening to body talk are also engaged as a way to perceive plant talk as it is expressed within the context of a direct relationship (with practitioner or with patient), and sometimes, within pedagogical practice in particular, to construct plant stories. The body re-presents the expressions of the plant as feeling. For Nathaniel Hughes,

⁹⁸ Gale, p. 242.

remaining grounded in a place of focused attention to one's own body is essential:

I hold a space where I very much encourage people to speak from a place of knowing themselves and owning their experiences. And if someone starts to get too cerebral - and I experience that as a sort of them starting to lift off so that their point of communication is actually coming from even above their head somewhere - I will very quickly try and bring them back to 'what are you feeling right now? What's happening right now?' By all means let concepts or meanings crystallise, but [...] I'm constantly bringing people back to that space of experience; relational experience.

Re-grounding thought and language in embodied experience reconfigures them as self-consciously emergent phenomena, in service to presence. Hughes emphasises this in his use of the word 'language' as a verb,⁹⁹ and has strategies for helping to hold it here in check:

And the ways to language that are interesting. So a few very simple things. Always working with 'I'. Owning your experience as yours; not moving into the collective or the passive, as 'people' or 'we' or 'our culture', or 'you'; because all of those are a kind of hypothetical construct rooted in an experience we've had ourselves. So, coming back to 'my experience'; 'I feel'; 'I understand'. That helps. The other thing I do is encourage people not to use grammar. [...] I think grammar holds us to a certain form of perception. And you just dispense with it and just go to nouns and verbs and adjectives and you find a lot more freedom. [...] People can express in two adjectives, more succinctly, and more precisely, and more powerfully, than they could in five minutes of prose. That's my experience. [...] We call it the practice of eloquence; coming increasingly into a place of less words and more potency.

The power and the potency of these words are, precisely, their proximity to the thing itself; the 'just is' of lived experience that characterises plant being, and our own embedded, embodied, ecological relational being.

An attuned awareness then to one's own experience and one's own body-talk

⁹⁹ Resonating, perhaps, with Heidegger's 'poetise'.

enables the practitioner to hear that of the plant; to listen to the 'conversation' taking place between plant-body and person-body (or between plant and person, on a bodily level). Or, as Gale describes, the patient may be supported to do so themselves. Nathaniel Hughes invokes the experience of drinking a cup of coffee in illustration of the way that these capacities are inherent to everybody.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, 'plant talk' would likely remain a challenging concept for many. Maybe we could conceive it as a strategic metaphor, or (in Baker's Wittgensteinian spirit) broaden the concept of 'talk' to accommodate plants - or use different words entirely - but the important point, in retaining these terms, is that the exchange between plant and person - even between plant-body and person-body - is not merely material and mechanistic, but is *expressive* of the aliveness of each. It is expressive in the ways that Dufrenne characterises poetic words, wherein the poem "expresses itself in expressing its meaning" as "the orange expresses itself in producing its juice". Which is to say that "sense is [...] within the sensuous";¹⁰¹ communication carries something fundamental and immediate of the thing itself. "It's a difficult thing to language all of this in a way" says Hughes, "because the plant just is; it is its being". But this just-being is not inertia, but self-coincidence with, or at least an extremely close proximity to, its own ongoing, world-rooted, purposive and agential aliveness. It is this that Cristina Cromer expresses in telling us that the plant *is* the story. Or that Nikki Darrell's student articulates as the medicine of the plant comprising its independent self-determined meanings. Again, she emphasises the import of this insight:

The plant aligns the person with its medicine, its personality; we need to take this to deeper levels of understanding; a more profound realisation of the fact that herbs bring particular tissues, systems, personality aspects into alignment, into health, that they bring new

¹⁰⁰ "If you've never had a cup of coffee before, what would you notice happening? People know these things... its just attuning that listening. And you can take that to greater and greater degrees of subtlety, the more you listen" (Eatweeds, 'Nathaniel Hughes').

¹⁰¹ Dufrenne, p. 17.

meanings into us to help us become more fully whom we were born to be.

For Nikki, for this kind of deep healing to occur, it is not only enough that the plant express itself within the body of the person, but that these expressions be integrated by the person as a complex, embodied, and interactive whole:

What we need to consider is that each plant is bringing information and meanings into the body; in order to effect a true healing shift, those meanings need to be embedded so that the entrainment that occurs can be habituated, making the shift a lasting one.¹⁰²

The information must be interpreted, and the new meanings in-habited. We could perhaps say that hearing and really 'comprehending' plant-talk as the expressions of plant medicines likewise involves receiving and integrating it deeply within one's being.

For our own part, we can also communicate our meanings to plants via the body:

If the seeds you are planting are not poisonous and are uncoated [...] then you may choose to suck them in your mouth before planting to exchange some of your information with them. Working with bare hands and walking barefoot on the soil you are working with enables you to send some of your physiological information into the soil (as well as enabling you to pick up the meanings from this amazing ecosystem). In this way, the plants and the soil receive another source of information about you and adapt their physiology into closer coherence with yours.¹⁰³

Again, this understanding retains an integrity to the understanding of both plant and person as independently meaningful, complex living things, whose existence crosses and gathers multiple levels of being. This conception accords with Hughes' positioning of the kinds of herbalism that he practices against a more 'symptomatic approach', particularly as regards patients with more long-term issues:

¹⁰² *Conversations*, pp. 60-1, 63.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

My experience is that that person needs to be met at a deeper level. They need to go to a place in themselves where their body has lost its ability to self-heal, find why its lost that ability, and then ask the plants in to help them. [...] For me, a big part of the healing is about reassociating with these aspects of self, reassociating with our body, and then asking the herbs for guidance in how to do that. And they're absolutely brilliant in that. I've often said I'd never work in healing without the herbs. Because I think to do that as a human just would be exhausting. To try to hold that space of healing, to try and help guide people through their own inner world, their own darkness, to support them through that, to hold their hand through confusion, doubt, fear, terror [...] is really hard. But when its me, the other person and the plant, that makes a massive difference, because the plant holds a certain integrity; a wholeness. And knowing what it is to be physically and spiritually whole and healthy. And every time the person connects to that plant, takes that plant - and I don't really make a distinction here between taking something as a medicine, and sitting with it, watching it grow - what's important to me is they're allowing that plant in in some way. And as they allow it in, it's reminding their body of the wholeness that is possible. It's reminding the body of what it's forgotten and its also guiding them into reconnection.¹⁰⁴

In Hughes' understanding, it is typically us, as patients, as those that have lost aspects of our selves, or lost connection with them, that lack wholeness, by which he means an 'integrity' across the full spectrum (in a holistic sense) of our selfhood. Plants retain it and it is this that the plant brings to us as medicine. Or, we could add, as meaning. The plant's own autonomous mean-ingful being reminds our bodies - or other parts of us - what they lack and help us to recover it.

Weighted Words: Making Language Matter

So far, I've talked about material forms of communication - 'body-talk'; 'plant-talk' - and the ways that they carry meaning. Learning to 'read' and interpret these

¹⁰⁴ Eatweeds, 'Nathaniel Hughes on Intuitive Herbalism'.

articulations is valuable for herbalists' capacities to match plant to patient, and sometimes herbalists may also attempt to express themselves to plants by means of plant-accordant modes of communication - sucking seeds to transmit information. A number of practices aim to work within the abstract language of the everyday to weight words with the dynamic force of the relationship, sometimes as a means of address to plants, sometimes as a means of articulating the desired shape or boundaries of the collaboration. One such practice is the use of 'intentions'. Many herbalists incorporate conscious intention setting or stating within their work. To have an intention within one's work is an active inhabitation of subjectivity. This practice counters the idea of a transcendent inquirer: it is an ownership of one's involvement and entanglement within the work; it facilitates relationship and collaboration. More than this, it is a practice of coming to the relationship with integrity; that of owning, and articulating, your own desires.

For a herbalist, this might be as simple as the fact that it is desired of that plant that it contribute its healing properties as a medicine (all herbalists come to their relationships with plants, by and large, with this element of agenda a factor). And in the choosing and mixing of plants as remedies this often takes on further specificity as the particularities of the person or problem for whom it is intended is held in mind. Clare Holohan says "when I'm making up medicines for people I will usually say something while I'm doing it, like 'hope it serves you well' [...] or something like that, and it'll probably be quite specifically related to that person". For Nikki Darrell, the information communicated to the plants, along with the contributions of the practitioner to the medicine-making process, affects the qualities - and the efficacy - of the plant as a medicine:

The way in which a medicine is prepared from a plant will have an effect on the way it expresses itself. [...] The overall meaning and medicine of the plant, for example *Avena* (oats), will be there but maybe certain aspects of its personality will come through more strongly, depending on the way it is prepared, who is giving the medicine and who is

receiving it. [...] Suffice it to say that the more we ask permission, set clear intentions from a place of integrity, and communicate with the plant as to what we intend to use the medicine for, whether it is to use for yourself or for use with a wider community, the better the medicine given by the plant.¹⁰⁵

Clear intentions, communicated (as in the asking of the plant's permission or informing it of the complaint for which its medicine is being invoked) or actively manifested in the mode of preparation, are understood to give shape to the encounter - the meeting between plant and patient - in advance.¹⁰⁶ When these intentions are articulated, the performative power of language is invoked. Intentions aim to shape a future (an aspect of what Kohn refers to as the *in futuro* dimension of living thought). Within human thinking, they evoke the visions, desires and imaginings that Scarry identifies a preliminary stage to 'making real'. The desiring, agenda-d being-towards that one brings to the encounter with the plant is given an additional layer of reality in the communication. It is projected, reiterated and amplified in the spoken words, echoing the performative uses of language historically in healing; spells, incantations, charms and enchantments.

Affirmations - another related tool of herbalist practice - are exemplary as instances of performative language. They are spoken as weighted articulations in order to effect change upon the existent:

[...] An affirmation is a tool that allows you to guide your thoughts in a conscious way. [...] Using language in this way connects you with your conscious thoughts by declaring something firmly and asserting something to be true. Affirmations are powerful when set in the present tense, making the statement true right now.¹⁰⁷

Our words are given substance by being tied in with a state of reality - our

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

¹⁰⁶ See too Dadachanji et al., p. 61.

¹⁰⁷ The Seed Sist@s, *The Sensory Herbal Handbook: Connect With the Medicinal Power of Your Local Plants* (London: Watkins, 2019), p. 66.

psychological state, our desires, our plans - to which they give additional weight by virtue of its being uttered (we can see a resonance in this with Starhawk's conception of the function of the symbolic, connecting across orders of being). The conceived mechanisms of the practice of affirmations are described by Penny Billington within the context of working with trees:

[...] Affirming statements encourage us in good behaviours [...] they make us more open to change and less defensive [...] effecting mood changes that can help us achieve our goals. [...] We have to believe, or pretend to believe, what comes out of our mouths: it is part of our belief in ourselves. So we will use affirmations to articulate out into the world those feelings that we will evoke within [...] to induce positive moods, new ways of thinking, and to connect to our imaginal view of the essence of tree-ness.¹⁰⁸

Affirmations create a direct, conscious and explicit linkage between our words and our feelings, as we wish to see them recreated on the plane of action or the material world. Again this recalls Scarry's description of the movement of making; an intermediary stage in the translation of our inner states (our feelings) into something slightly more tangible and less ephemeral (a wish, a vision, a plan... projected outwards in words) on the way to its further concretisation as action or artefact. We can see here how affirmations occur within a similar realm of ontologically slippery creative reality-making to that of fiction. Billington articulates the importance of what we earlier explored as a suspension of disbelief and acting as though. Saying a thing is so does not make it true. But saying a thing that we feel or desire or envision or intend out loud, adds to it an extra aspect of real-ness, which serves to help consolidate and strengthen these transient, slippery 'inner' states within our own subjective realities, helping us to create cohesion between different elements of ourselves.

Another form of performative language is the practice of making promises or

¹⁰⁸ Penny Billington, *Wisdom of Oak, Ash and Yew* (Minnesota: Llewellyn, 2015), p. 26-7. Although Billington is not herself a herbalist, these conceptions resonate with herbalists' use of affirmation as described above.

commitments. Nathaniel Hughes emphasises the value of commitment for cultivating deep relationship with plants:

My experience is that the commitment to really work with one at a time does help. I tend to suggest to the people I work with that really meeting three plants a year at quite a deep level is pretty good going. So, to use an analogy of human relationships, it's a difference between an acquaintance, a friend, a lover, and somebody beyond a lover; you really let them in and they change you. Your whole worldview shifts because of the time you spent with them. That's what I'm looking for.¹⁰⁹

Commitment functions here as both a delimitation of focus and an affirmation of intention, drawing an invisible bounded space of meaning, such that "when you make a commitment to a plant, everything that emerges from that point onwards is significant"; it facilitates the emergence of - and recognition of - meaning. Similar to the setting of an intention, it helps to define the desired shape of the encounter, or in this case, the relationship. Hughes continues:

In many ways, its very different to a human relationship. It grows through commitment, it grows through being vulnerable, and allowing yourself to be changed by it. It grows through a good bit of critical reflection on what's actually happening. It's a slow process; it's not a quick route, definitely. But the depths that people can go to with a plant means that they understand the plant in a way that when they want to share it with other people, they have a very clear sense of if that plant is going to resonate and be right for someone else. Which, if your knowledge of a plant is intellectual-knowledge based, for instance symptom based, my experience is it's a lot more hit and miss.¹¹⁰

Within promises and commitments, it is the relationship or intended relationship which invests our words with substance; they are a manifestation of language as a function of relation. Indeed, on a social level, promises and commitments - and our

¹⁰⁹ Eatweeds, 'Nathaniel Hughes on Intuitive Herbalism'. The analogy of human relationships is echoed by Carole Guyett, who characterises her relationship with plants as "similar to relationships with humans [...] like close friends, or very close friends, or lovers, or acquaintances, or ones I don't really know very well", and also Cristina Cromer who describes journeying to meet plants with whom one already has a relationship as "like going on a date"!

¹¹⁰ Eatweeds, 'Nathaniel Hughes'.

capacity to rely upon them as manifestations of intention - are fundamental to social cohesion where this kind of order is not imposed from above (as in enforcement, for example).¹¹¹ In keeping our promises, we manifest the truth of our being as related things - we pull language back from the unaccountability of abstraction, to put it in service of ecological reality.

Performativity and Artifice

Promises, intentions and affirmations are all examples of 'speech acts'; language that aims to influence reality rather than merely corresponding to it. Language on these accounts is reconceived as (not merely a vehicle but) a powerful instrument of world-transformation, whose usage is designed to effect certain ends.¹¹² The poststructuralist uptake of this concept added an understanding of the role of context in linguistic performativity, showing how language already carries its own agendas, or the accumulated agendas of others, and is not straightforwardly pliable to the will of the user.¹¹³ Which is to say that words do not just reflect the world; they do things to it, but what they do isn't always what they seem to be doing, and they don't always do what we want them to. This slightly wayward quality of language - that words don't necessarily always have the impact that we desire, or convey our intentions - is facilitated by its representative functions, and the gap that this re-presentation necessitates. Although present in any form of language (which always inherently involves the crossing of a border, an element of translation, in its sayings or tellings), within our highly emergent language, this gap occurs across a gulf of established abstraction. As such, it has developed a strong capacity to transcend material presence, enduring entirely independently of whatever

¹¹¹ Another example of this is in the oath taken by new members of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists - the 'Affirmation of Herbal Practice' (where there is no statutory regulation).

¹¹² As classically expounded in J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

¹¹³ See the Derrida-Searle debate.

utterance-events, subsisting in books, or even less tangible codified forms. Drawing meaning from a web of linguistic self-referentiality, words can easily refer to and invoke things that perhaps have not ever been. Which is to say that our language facilitates fictions; imaginative constructions of art-ifice (which, as we have seen, does not mean that they are not - and cannot become more - real).

There is advantage to be gained in using signs for deceit, in mis-representing. Within an anthropocentric thought-language schema of world-making, the ethical requirements of responsibility that reflect our interimplication with the living world are obscured by the distance of our thinking from its ecological ground (the distance of abstraction). The words that we inhabit (as thoughts, as collective logics, as materially-inscribed environmentally ubiquitous human values) are structured less by those networks of worldly relation that give rise to them, and more by their relation to one another (linguistic convention), which self-supportedness confers emergent symbolic language with a degree of transcendence and freedom.¹¹⁴ But in making this bargain they also relinquish the force of these grounding connections - and their sustaining powers. Our words do not endure in the living world, but instead transcribed and codified in letters, reliant upon human engagement. Thus they gain one kind of power but lose another. And so do we. Our inhabitation of a highly abstracted self-referential language system gives us a tremendous power of non-accountability: we can reconfigure other living beings as lifeless resources, effortlessly categorising them out of consideration, we can say one thing and mean/do another with casual ease. But our language does not nurture a connection to and embeddedness within the world or gain its force from these relationships.¹¹⁵ Herbalist practices of intentions and commitments can be understood in this regard as an attempt to rekindle this embeddedness and its implications; as an attempt to 'become reciprocal' (which state of being does not in itself require cognitive

¹¹⁴ Kohn, p. 8.

¹¹⁵ See too Abram, *Sensuous* on all of the above themes.

involvement) *through* language, as empowered by actions.

The highly abstract languages of EuroWestern culture are well suited to artifice, but this potential is inherent to some degree in any form of representation where there is a distance of translation between the thing and its re-presentation. But in fact, as we'll see shortly, whilst our language is well suited to misrepresentations, a facet of its adeptness at imaginative construction, deceit and artifice is not only a function of highly abstracted symbolic language, but discoverable within the more physical communications of the plant world, whose order involves all kinds of hustles and ploys. Certain Passionflower plants (*Passiflora spp.*), for example, being prone to being made host to the voracious larvae of the *Heliconius* butterfly, have the capacity not only to vary the shape of their leaves to re-present themselves as less desirable non-host plants,¹¹⁶ but also to grow small yellow bumps - like butterfly eggs - on the underside of their leaves, making them an undesirable option for *Heliconius* (the larvae of which are cannibalistic) that are seeking a site to lay their eggs.¹¹⁷ This is a kind of plant artifice: the Passionflower represents itself, within its own physical form, as a non-desirable kind of vine, or as already host to butterfly eggs (which representations depend upon butterfly interpretations - their immediate 'aboutness' - for their meaning).

Another example is that of Spider Orchid-bee encounters, which Matthew Hall references as a 'process of deceit'. The orchid solicits the interest of male bees by releasing scent compounds:

These compounds precisely mimic the scent of the sexually receptive female *A. nigroaenea*, and as the male is attracted to the plant for 'copulation', pollination is effected. After

¹¹⁶ Daniel Chitwood and Wagner Otoni, 'Divergent Leaf Shapes Among *Passiflora* Species Arise from a Shared Juvenile Morphology', *Plant Direct*, 11:1 (2017) <doi:10.1002/pld3.28>.

¹¹⁷ Lawrence E. Gilbert, 'The Co-Evolution of a Butterfly and a Vine', *Scientific American*, 247:2 (1982), 110-121.

copulation, *O. sphegodes* flowers emit a compound that is released by nonreceptive female *A. nigroaenea*, which serves to inhibit further copulation, thus directing pollinators to nearby unpollinated flowers.¹¹⁸

These exchanges provoke wonder as examples of inventive artifice in the plant world. But actually, very much chemical signalling of plants involves elements of creative representation. For example, in increasing the level of bitter compounds in their leaves in response to insect or herbivore attack, plants represents themselves to the unwanted grazer as not good to eat. Sometimes this will happen only after a threshold of tolerability is crossed - it was, but is no longer, good to eat. Some plants use these chemicals to communicate not only with their grazers, but other plants - kin or sometimes even species-distinct neighbours, such as the well-known example of the Acacia trees that release ethylene to the atmosphere in response to herbivore damage.¹¹⁹ To nearby Acacias, this is a message warning of grazing herbivores in the area - they respond by increasing their own ethylene content. To the giraffes it is a message that the plant is not good to eat (although giraffes grown wise to these Acacia-tricks may beat the neighbourhood ethylene cascade by browsing small amounts of leaves from each tree, and only from those growing downwind of the others).

This plant self-representation (as gastronomically unappealing) occurs immediately on the level of the physical, the bodily. This is a form of plant acting as action. These representations are reality-creating. The plant is being eaten because it is tasty and nutritious, and it wants to be being not eaten. So it represents, and in so doing recreates, itself as inedible. The first part of the process is directed at others-not-itself, and the second (simultaneous) part involves self-transformation. But here the coincidence or collapse of acting and action is even more acute. The self-

¹¹⁸ *Persons*, p. 101.

¹¹⁹ Furstenburg, D. And W. Van Hoven, 'Condensed Tannin as Anti-Defoliate Agent against Browsing by Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) in the Kruger National Park', *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology*, 107:2 (1994), 425- 31.

expressions of plants are often very physical - gestural, postural, chemical - and intention manifests itself directly on these levels. Plant self-presence/plant immanence, and plant re-presentation are not so far apart. Plant performativity is an inherent facet of plant being. Where our own spoken word-communications tend to pass out of tangible existence soon after their invocation, subsisting (whilst enduring as abstract form) only as traces in their effects, in the slower-moving physical world of plants, speaking, and ceasing to speak (allowing ethylene-flooded leaves to return to normal levels; the opening and closing of a flower) takes longer. Perhaps some changes are permanent. Plant articulations are closely bound with plant presence. This doesn't mean, as we've seen above, that they are one and the same - there is room within this process of plant saying for both artifice, and artistry. But within the physical languages of growth and appearance however, artifice is energetically costly, compared to our own communicative medium of abstract ephemeral weightless words where artifice is comparatively effortless.

Plant Performativity; Plant Poetics

The bee-orchid exchange is well-known as an example of an affective encounter from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. They focus on the optic (for the bee) and tactile elements of the encounter: the orchid replicates the form of the lower half of a female wasp, attracting male suitors who, having rubbed themselves over the appropriate flower part, then do the job of transporting pollen to other plants. Within Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysics of surfaces, this is not mimicry, but a manifestation of the relationship between wasp and orchid that is one of evolutionary entanglement. This flower-insect arrangement is an instance of co-harnessing and interspecies co-becoming; "not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a

becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp".¹²⁰ This conception finds a reiteration in Marder's reading of plants as 'essentially superficial';¹²¹ in accordance with Hegel, whose "imputation of a sedimented superficiality ("in sedimentary strata") to the being of plants [...] bears a close resemblance to the 'thousand plateaus', where, despite the super-imposition and overlapping of multiple levels of sense and non-sense, the dimension of depth is absent".¹²² The emphasis upon surfaces aims to overcome the anthropomorphism inherent in accounts that, intentionally or unintentionally, uphold notions of inner lives and psychological interiorities and coherent individuated organisms. For Marder, to conceive of plants as 'selves' is an anthropomorphic imposition, wholly alien to the phenomenology of plant life, which exemplifies this dis-organised immanence of Deleuze and Guattari's bodies-without-organs.¹²³ 'Plant thinking' means getting beyond this. And indeed for Marder, it means life itself. He continues:

These countless superficialities of vegetal being form the scene where the life of plants unfolds outside all organismic mediations that [...] act to stifle that which is living. To live is to be superficial and dis-organized: to exist outside the totality of an organism: to be a plant.¹²⁴

Marder rejects representation and the imaginal as facets of consciousness, irrelevant to plant being-in-the-world, which entails a determinative immanence within an environment. With plants actions, there is no feedback loop by which actions are recuperated as identity; the formation of selves, by virtue of consciousness, is the

¹²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1987), p.10.

¹²¹ Marder alludes to the thinking of Ponge in his conception of the ontological superficiality of plants, by which he contends that plants have no hidden interiority of depth - do not conceive themselves as selves, but are what they are in relation with their environment: "[t]hey can certainly make sounds in conjunction with the elements, as in the case of wind passing through the reed or a bamboo grove, and they can send biochemical signals in response to altering environmental conditions, but the silence of vegetation is unbreakable and absolute, because, deprived of the possibility of speaking, it does not keep anything back, does not conceal anything" (*Plant Thinking*, p. 74).

¹²² *Plant Thinking*, p.84.

¹²³ The assertion that vegetal being is essentially superficial presupposes the idea that the plant, whose forms and functions are fluid, is not an organism but rather what Deleuze and Guattari term a "body without organs,"; a mode of dis-organization, "a pure multiplicity of immanence." Deleuze and Guattari, p. 157.

¹²⁴ *Plant Thinking*, p. 84.

province of minds inside skulls. Plants, rather, operate by virtue of 'non-conscious intentionality', "where meanings proliferate without the intervention of conscious representations". For Marder, plants thus offer us a living model for the kind of thinking that transcends the (philosophically classic) enclosure of selves and their representations. Free from the fetters of identity and of interiority, they embody a radical ecology that illuminates truths of existence beyond the bounds of our experience.

To lend our cognitive powers to efforts of deanthropocentric imaginings of plant being is engaging, and as philosophy, this commitment to a radically decentred, ecological standpoint of enquiry is a mark of integrity. But from a plantworker's standpoint, these immaculate efforts are problematic. The alterity of plants is preserved and respected, but the chasms across which plantworkers attempt to build bridges are widened. It is much more difficult, within this model, to get to plants, or, if we can get to them, it's very difficult to bring anything of our interactions back with us to our collective human-worlds. The experiences remain other and inarticulate/inassimilable, and thus that which we can say tends to be (as ever) much more talking-about than talking-with. The development of modes of perceiving and understanding and rearticulating plant-lives and plant-concerns in ways that attempt to surpass our own thought-language frameworks is in some ways an admirable objective, but it is a philosophical exercise. The development of practicable and practical relations with plants do not allow us to relinquish the tools of articulation and of understanding that form the framework for our human collective experience. "The big challenge is to stay in yourself, but also to be in relationship." Respons-ibility involves recognising your own humanity within the bounds of the encounter; owning your own projections; integrating the insight that plants offer us as teachers, or meanings they offer as medicines.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Perhaps these are one and the same.

A different strategy allows that, within the bounds of the relation (self-consciously, cautiously, humbly) we consider plants as selves (as exemplified by Ávila Runa plant relations, as observed and analysed by Kohn). This strategy echoes that of broadening out - of sharing - those terms that we “jealously guard” as the preserve of humans and perhaps animals,¹²⁶ such that they no longer need operate metaphorically. This is not just a linguistic trick. Language constructs reality. It is a self-aware performative stance that invites exchange. It is a rejection of the underlying premises of human exceptionalism that allows us to define these concepts as exclusive of plant being in the first place (and anthropomorphism as a fallacy); it reflects and reifies an ontology of ecological interimplication. It has the practical advantage that it allows us to enter more easily into relationship with them. Kohn’s aforementioned observations of Ávila Runa cooking practices illustrates this approach: meat is consumed raw when the desired communion is with the animal (to take on an elements of its spirit) and thoroughly boiled when the purpose is objectification (to render it as meat).¹²⁷ He does not mention the processes of plant preparation, but the point is that to have a meaningful relationship with an other necessitates recognising it as a self. In Kohn’s analysis of Ávila Runa practices, one enters into relationship with non-human others as a self within an ‘ecology of selves’.

I think that there is more similarity than there is difference within these two depictions of plant engagement strategies (i.e. plants-as-selves that think through representation, and plants-as-radical-alterity that think via ‘non-conscious intentionality’, as described by Kohn and Marder respectively). Both seek to develop an attunement to and capacity for a kind of ‘thinking’ that happens beyond the boundaries of the self-enclosed human; that is more basic than the abstract,

¹²⁶ As argued by Michael Pollan in his foreword to Mancuso and Viola’s *Brilliant Green* (p. xii).

¹²⁷ Kohn, p. 119.

linguistically-structured, anthropocentrically self-reflecting thinking that we tend to do; is ecologically participant and open to otherness. Certainly, Kohn's understanding of representation (which concept he liberates from the anthropocentric impositions of the "uniquely human semiotic modality" that is symbolic language) fits it into this picture.¹²⁸ The very premise of the work is that this is how life (including forests, including humans fundamentally when you go down through the accumulated layers of abstraction) thinks. It is a picture of deep mind-continuity (but mind is no longer a marker of interiority). It recognises representations as having agency of their own (independently of selves) within an interactive ecology (exemplified by 'the effortless efficacy of form', propagating itself through us). Such representations for Kohn, are pre-thought, pre-unit, perhaps even pre-bodies, but they are intentional and affective of reality. Kohn sees humans entering into this picture as 'selves' within an 'ecology of selves'.

Marder rejects the term 'selves' (along with 'representation') seeking to resist the recuperative tendencies of linguistically constructed selves to re-gather these thought processes as identity, reshaping them in their own image - the feedback loop of consciousness. But this picture is conceived in challenge to the classical constructions of Western metaphysics. Kohn's semiotically-based picture does not carry these connotations, but regards a self as "a waypoint in semiosis [...] the outcome of a process that produces a new sign that interprets a prior one"; processes of representation that are "in the world" and characteristic of the way that living thoughts construct themselves.¹²⁹ This is a radically different conception of selfhood, in which it "can be distributed over bodies" or be "one of many other selves within a body",¹³⁰ which allows for the vegetal explosion of identity that is

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 39. Kohn's work is very clear in its consideration of representation (something characteristic of all life processes) as distinct from language (something descriptive of the characteristic human form of symbolic representation), on account of the theoretical tendency to interpret other than human communications through the lens of our own linguistic forms. This thesis, whilst cautious, has not taken the same pains to avoid the latter term in recognition that diverse plant scholars and plantworkers have taken a different tack in making efforts towards the deanthropocentrising of 'language'.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 75, 41.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

fundamental for Marder. Kohn's strategy is a broadening of the reach of these concepts, classically restricted to the human sphere, with the contention that "the most productive way to overcome this dual-ism is not to do away with representation (and by extension telos, intentionality, "aboutness," and selfhood), or simply project human kinds of representation elsewhere, but to radically rethink what it is that we take representation to be".¹³¹ Both of these pictures effect a radical challenge to anthropocentric paradigms of thought from the perspective of the ecological. Where Marder's, drawing on phenomenology, finds itself hitting the limits of unknowable alterity, Kohn's picture, intending to "make general claims about the world" with the support of a recognition that "generality itself is a property of the world", echoes the ecological strategy of making "guesses" to find workable fit.¹³² Kohn's rethinking of representation in ecological rather than (human) linguistic terms as characteristic of living dynamics, finds it to be frequently highly embodied (the anteater's snout is a representation of the shape of the ant tunnel). If representation is reconceived as the fundamental currency of ecological exchange and relationship, then the kind of radical ecological model that results is one that sees the world in its vibrant capacities for interaffectivity. And again, there is not quite so much of a distance between representations (in all of their affective 'in the world' realness) and the *melée* of repetitions, iterations, deviations and becomings that characterise affective philosophies. But where Kohn notes that these schemas continue to uphold "the alignment between humans, culture, the mind, and representation, on the one hand, and nonhumans, nature, bodies, and matter, on the other",¹³³ his own semiotic schema of ecological representation retains 'meaning' (as a facet of the 'aboutness' of living things) as something central, such that thought, mind, and even culture (as we've seen) can be understood as elements of life beyond the human.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹³² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 40.

Returning again to the bee-orchid encounter, Karen Houle, focusing on the (Deleuzian) 'between' of the encounter, discovers the machinations of a 'third agent'; very frequently a "'flower volatile,' a chemical signal" at whose characteristic "almost unfathomably complex" specificity she marvels.¹³⁴ These chemical signalings are integral to the encounter (between bee and orchid, or between plant and plant) in a way that they must themselves be regarded as agents, rather than just the outputs of two entities in a 'pairing' or 'partnership':

[The] dyadic view of mutualisms underplays and oversimplifies the truths of the critical sophisticated and still-largely-not-understood agency of other elements, in this case the inorganic. When we really focus on this feature of the so-called partnering, we discover that whatever is going on between two kinds of plants is neither simple nor in-between. [...] Organic compounds - the non-living - is an actant in a complex interaction and not merely a background or vehicle for the interaction of a couple.¹³⁵

Houle uses the language of plant "signalling", but rejects 'representation' in favour of 'expression' (in line with Deleuze and Guattarian concepts of 'becoming-plant') in her main ambition to think 'otherwise-than-animality', discovering plant communications as thoroughly different from human communication and heterogeneous in themselves. But this understanding of plant volatile oil compounds (VOC's) in their ethereally material being, fundamentally communicative, as 'actants' in their own right, accords well with a picture of semiotic agency as the ground of ecological exchange. On Kohn's picture, these organic compounds are themselves living, where life is conceived as an emergent phenomenon; the product of this circulation of communicative exchange, they could even be accorded a degree of 'selfhood'. These chemical plant expressions are also performative. They are actants which perform in very specific ways, establishing alliances, effecting change. It is perhaps easier to conceive of volatile

¹³⁴ Karen Houle, 'Animal, Vegetable or Mineral: Ethics as Extension or Becoming?', *Symposium*, 19:2 (2015), 37–56 (49).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

oil compounds as agents because (like spoken words) they are 'put out' by the plant, emitted to the air, and often gain some distance from the rest of the physical body of the plant (recall here also Tsing's recognition of this new dispersed plant-VOC assemblage as its 'smell body'). But not all meaning-ful (signifying) plant compounds are separable from what we would think of as the physical plant in this way; to engage with elements of taste in a plant, for example, such as bitter compounds, we typically ingest (and thus destroy) a part of it. Which is to say that plant performativity is an integral facet of plant physicality. When plant medicines carry transformative plant meanings into our bodies, they do so by virtue of elements of the plant - compounds, constituents - from which they were prepared.

To conceive of these elements - plant volatiles - as agential representations, does not mean (to follow through on Houle's point) that they are only imitative of the (discrete, isolable, 'individual') plant from which they originated. Whilst connected (perhaps still part of a wider dispersed 'smell body' identity), they are also, in themselves, 'actants' within this complex ecology of interaction. They can be considered to carry a degree of 'aliveness' not because all matter is vibrant, but because they have an 'aboutness'; they carry their own meaning and possibilities of meaning (in a different kind of language, we might say their own 'intentions' or 'desires' and 'potential'). They are their own agents because, for plant volatiles, this 'aboutness' is not limited to, say, the evolution of the plant species, but integrally involves exchange, alliance, kinship and transformation. Houle underscores how "the chemical profile of a plant is often entirely unique to that individual plant" and changes according to what kind of insect is attacking it and, even more than this, that these communications cross the boundaries of kinship; Sagebrush chemicals can induce grasshopper resistance in Wild Tobacco.¹³⁶ Thus:

The *teloi* or "self-realization" of plant communication is neither strictly individual nor even

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 46-8.

species-specific, but is accomplished in and through radical kinships, through a fantastically versatile and multi-directional capacity to harmonize a multiplicity of actions.

Translated into the language and conceptual schema that we've been using, plant 'mean-ings' are not just 'about' species-specific evolutionary ends, but also have to do with kinship, exchange and connection.

Plant meanings - their aboutness - express their ecological entanglements.

Returning a moment to herbalist-plant relations and the interpretative schema of the Doctrine of Signatures, we might recognise this ecological, entangled 'aboutness' in the idea that "the way a herb is in the world will inform it of the way to be in your body".¹³⁷ 'Meanings' of plant medicines - articulated in the compounds and constituents that are carried into our bodies via plant remedies - speak of the plant as a complex whole, but (although considered by herbalists predominantly on the level of species 'types' - an 'iconic confusion' that shapes herbalist-plant relationships), the complex 'wholeness' of plants is nothing definitively bounded and discrete, but the dynamic exploded identities that involve relationship with soil, with kin and 'neighbours' and insects - and with people. Considering the idea that herbalists and herbs work together as one another's 'convivial tools', some of their ecological entanglements are, indeed, with us. Cristina Cromer considers "Bairnwort - the lawn Daisies - *Bellis Perennis*" - as a plant that "has a really close connection with us humans; and they're merry, and they're chatty" and they thrive in lawns, where kids are "rolling around and playing and bruising themselves". Through the Doctrine of Signatures, she detects something of this conviviality in the aboutness of Daisy family - *Compositae* - plants, a distinguishing characteristic of which is that the flowerhead is not just a single flower, but "a collection of many flowers":

There's a confederacy in that - companionship, confederacy, communion, cooperation. All

¹³⁷ Hedley and Shaw, p. xxiii.

the things that are necessary for tribe to function well. And if you then consider that some of our most important and most well-tolerated medicines come from the Daisy family. So Calendula, Dandelion, Yarrow, Chamomile and on and on it goes... Echinacea... this is the basic medicine chest. [...] This comradeship, that is critical and crucial to us as humans, is expressed in the Daisy head, and here it is with some of our most used and best tolerated medicines [...] The Doctrine of Signatures that's inherently in the *Compositae* family - which is this companionship, this cooperation - tells us about humans, about our chattiness, our sociability, and it also speaks to the close connection between the Daisy family and humans.

Part of the meanings of *Compositae* - what they stand 'for' and 'to' - is articulated in (what we can perceive as) their characteristic conviviality - or any of the other 'C' words - which conviviality is expressed both in the composite construction of their flowerheads, and also in the way that they grow in places where people walk and play and will sit down and "make daisy chains". On Cromer's reading, a part of the meanings that Daisy brings to the body as a medicine, healing bruises for example, expresses something of this characteristic of confederacy and conviviality, of which its close relationship with people is a part, wherein their inhabiting of lawns where kids roll around and play seems sometimes "almost like the daisies are rough and tumbling with the children".

Plant 'mean-ings' express the ecological entanglements - with the soil, with the elements, with the landscape, with their pollinators, with other plants, sometimes even with humans - that are a part of their own essential being, and the metaphoric schema of the Doctrine of Signatures is a means by which they might be 'read', and we might also understand the body's uptake of these meanings in healing as a form of interpretation. But plant self-expressions are not as formulaic as ideas of doctrines might lead us to think. Plant meanings, like those of poetry, are multiple and ambiguous; might be interpreted in many ways. We can see this in the way that they express themselves as medicines; that different bodies interpret them in different ways. Valerian is famed as an aid to sleep, but for a small percentage of

people it acts as a stimulant; Cramp Bark has been used both to halt uterine contractions in threatened miscarriage and facilitate them during labour; no herb has only one medicine. It is for this that herbalism is an art as well as a science. Moreover, plant entanglements, and plant meanings, are not simply functional. Kohn's semiotic account foregrounds evolutionary examples. "Elongated snouts and tongues *stand* to a future anteater (a "somebody") *for* something about the architecture of an ant colony."¹³⁸ And we might find plenty of equivalent examples: the flowers of the *Labiatae* family that, 'lips protruding' and 'gorges forming', produce "counter forms to the insects, who frequent those blossoms" such that, as anthroposophist Wilhelm Pelikan noted, "[i]f one pours wax into these flowers, so is the cast form similar to the bee's head with stretched out proboscis".¹³⁹ In this case, to think of the flower as a sign on Kohn's terms, it might make more sense to imagine that it stands to the (potential) bee for something about the offering of nectar that the plant has to make. But to think in these who-to and what-for terms doesn't always seem to capture everything. An alternative assessment is offered by nineteenth century botanist Almira Hart Lincoln who educated her female students that (despite its usefulness as "a resting place for insects in search of honey") "after all our inquiries into the uses of the corolla, we are obliged to acknowledge that it appears less important in the economy of vegetation than many less showy organs" but rather "seems chiefly designed to beautify and enliven creation by the variety and elegance of its forms, the brilliancy of its colouring, and the sweetness of its perfume".¹⁴⁰

Returning to the bee-orchid encounter one more time, Natasha Myers and Carla Hustak find it to be exemplary of the performative creativity of plants. Their analysis

¹³⁸ Kohn, p. 74-5 (italics in original).

¹³⁹ Wilhelm Pelikan, *Heilpflanzekunde I* (Switzerland: Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag am Goetheanum, 1980), p. 46. Cited in Julia Graves, *The Language of Plants: A Guide to the Doctrine of Signatures* (New York: Lindisfarne, 2021), p. 111.

¹⁴⁰ Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps, *Familiar Lectures on Botany, Practical, Elemental and Physiological* (New York: Huntingdon and Savage, 1850), p. 73.

refutes those functionalist narratives (Darwin, too, had his version of the bee-orchid story) of reproductive fitness and energy conservation, which accounts “cannot admit pleasure, play, or improvisation within or among species”.¹⁴¹ Their alternative offers “a reading that amplifies accounts of the creative, improvisational, and fleeting practices through which plants and insects involve themselves in one another’s lives”, paying attention “to the affects, sensations, and practices that shape relations in plant/insect ecologies”.¹⁴² Plants, for them, are practitioners of pleasure, play, and excess (which characterisation easily aligns with our very ordinary appreciation of plants - ‘flowers’ in particular - in terms of their sensuous aspects; their fragrance, their colour, their beauty). They are “alchemists who turn sunlight and carbon dioxide into volatile utterances and innovate forms of atmospheric media amenable for long-distance expression” and “artisans who craft mimetically responsive anatomies”.¹⁴³ On Hustak and Myers’ reading, plants are firmly freed from the constraints of biological determination, to be recognised as agents of creativity. The hypericin of St. John’s Wort stands in part for something of its relationship with the sun (such that plants that grow in spots that do not benefit from the ‘full sunshine’ that is its preference tend to have less of this pigment) and perhaps some of those who it stands to are humans with sunburned flesh, whose skin it soothes. But why has it chosen to express this relationship this way, to take this particular form of golden yellow flowers that will turn a maceration a magical red? Or again, why do Asters and Goldenrod look beautiful together?¹⁴⁴

The idea of plants as artists is further elaborated in mirko nikolić & Neda Radulović’s exploration of ‘vegetal performativity’, where they discover forms of artistic creation

¹⁴¹ In their words, “working athwart the reductive, mechanistic, and adaptationist logics that ground the ecological sciences”. Carla Hustak and Natascha Myers, ‘Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters’, *differences*, 23:3 (2012), 74–118 (77).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 104.

¹⁴⁴ Wall Kimmerer, p. 46.

in the excessive, 'for its own sake' aspect of plant production.¹⁴⁵ This 'for its own sake' production tends to "contain strong aesthetic components",¹⁴⁶ which is to say strongly sensory and sensual. Foregrounding 'touch' in their analysis, the kinds of 'pleasure, play and excess' that Hustak and Myers regard as characteristic of plant being is understood to be "profoundly queer", reflective of "intense desires for transitioning and becoming-other",¹⁴⁷ disrupting all sorts of (interspecies) identity boundaries. On these accounts, nature creates art. Artistic production is not merely the province of the human. Returning with these insights to the framework of the poetic (which works through language to disrupt linguistic identity and logocentrism and works within and through thought to open it to the world that grounds it) they offer a characterisation of plant expressivity and plant communication as forms of poetic production and plant being as, itself, poetic. Thus perhaps we can say (broadening the insights of our explorations of metaphor) that a poetic framework of approach works well for plantwork because plant being is a kind of being that accords with the poetic. A kind of being that involves sensuality, play, excess, artistry, collaboration, transformation and relationship.

Art-ifice and performativity then, are inherent within the operations of our language, because they are inherent within the operations of the world-expressive and world-expressed languages in which our own is rooted. Plants have the capacity to re-present themselves with artistry, but they do so in ways that are bound by (energetically costly) physicality. Thus their capacity for fictions and artifice is limited; it does not match those of the unrooted abstract languages that we work within. For the most part, the re-presentations of plants simply tell the stories that they themselves are, expressing their character in different ways on different levels and

¹⁴⁵ nikolić and Radulović, 'Inhuman Touch', p. 14. nikolić and Radulović build explicitly on Myers and Hustak's observation, taking their cue from Elizabeth Grosz: "[t]his goes in line with Elizabeth Grosz's feminist reading of Darwin, whereby she sees art operating on evolutionary timescales: "[a]rt and nature, art in nature, share a common structure: that of excessive and useless production—production for its own sake, production for the sake of profusion and differentiation" (Elizabeth Grosz, cited in nikolić and Radulović, p. 14).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

within different contexts. Plant representations are weighted, sensuous, worldly, and meaning-ful. And they make sense upon both of these levels. As we inscribe our meanings on the world, by virtue of our words and habits and creations (as our culture does, destructively, by virtue of vast technologies of abstraction), so plants inscribe their meanings on us; on our bodies, as medicines (or, occasionally, poisons). It is appropriate to engage with plants through poetic practices because plants articulate themselves in ways that accord with the poetic. Because their expressions are sensually rich and affective, abundantly meaning-ful, engaging and appealing, playfully excessive. Because, as archetypally ecological, their being is an inhabitation of relationship. A poetic approach is a respons-ible stance-towards that opens up possibilities of connection and exchange within and through our habitual thinking. Invoking the power of *poiesis*, a poetic approach is appropriate to our kinship and connection with plants as living beings, illuminating and enacting ecological interconnection.

Summary

This chapter began by looking at the function of metaphor as a fundamental tool of herbalist engagements with plants, emphasising its capacity to create connection and serve relationship across difference in re-presenting one thing as another, which connecting across difference accords with ecological logics. Its amplification of particular aspects of a thing was also understood to accord with an ecological conception of the world as storied and its tendencies to figure abstract ideas as things more easily felt and sensed understood to be in accordance with a dynamic of 'going down' through the layers of emergent language. Metaphor was acknowledged to be pervasive in our thinking, and our acting, as a mechanism with the power to structure experience and create realities. But this inherent poetic

power of metaphor is excluded (metaphor is consigned to the realm of the literary poetic) by analytic truth regimes because it does not accord with the story of objective reality, and thus, despite its pervasiveness, is culturally invisibilised; a dynamic encapsulated in the overt exclusion and covert readmittance of metaphor within Linnaean taxonomy. This exclusion was found to resonate with the cultural exclusion of plants, and the function of metaphor itself found to resonate with the ways that plants themselves express themselves. Its appropriateness for plantwork was thus understood by virtue of its capacity to bridge our symbolic abstract thinking and the ecologically structured thinking in which it is grounded.

These functions of metaphor were recognised to exemplify the kind of re-weighting of language with its own worldly ties, and the recontextualising of abstract thought within the living vitality of ecological exchange, that is necessary for deanthropocentrising our thought and language such that they no longer distance us from the living world but support our participation with it. Herbalist practices of listening to plant-talk and body-talk also do this, and so, too, does the performative language of the intentions, affirmations, and promises and commitments that are frequently features of herbalist-plant relations. This weighting of our own language forms was also complemented by a recognition of plant self-expression as not so inextricably tied to presence as it is often conceived; in particular, although our (abstract symbolic, self-referential) language is highly suited to artifice and fiction (which words, in our culture, conflate creativity and irreality/untruth), considering examples of plant 'deceit' allowed us to recognise these facets of the more physical languages of plants too. With these recognitions, plants could be conceived not only as agential, but as artists, that can re-imag-ine and re-present themselves creatively, in ways that are also often playful and exceed functionality. In this way, we could say that a poetic approach - as one that invokes the creative worldmaking powers of the poetic - is fitting for plantwork, because plants express themselves in ways that accord with the poetic.

Conclusions

This thesis began by asking ‘what do ecologically appropriate relationships with plants as living others look like?’, and ‘how can we go about cultivating meaningful relationships with plants as complex living beings?’. To answer these questions, it looked to herbalist practices of working together with plants as sites wherein ecologically resonant ways of thinking, knowing and doing that accord with our being as world-entangled are cultivated and flourish (and have done so historically, on the margins and in the cracks, as a strand of folk knowledge). It found these practices to enact a poetic mode of engagement that - through techniques of creating space in the world and in thought and of offering careful attention, along with a responsive receptivity to that illuminated - dis-cover knowledge of the world from within the bounds of situated, embodied relationships with plants. These kinds of approach were seen to work through, from within, the ‘thought-language-habit nexus’ that mediates our interactions with the living world to elicit something of its integral vitality. Namely, for herbalists, the characterful, convivial, meaningful particularities of plant lives and plant identities.

In answer to the further questions, then, of ‘what can be learned from herbalist-plant relationships of ecological right relation and what are their implications?’, it also understood these engagements as radically potent forms of resistance to the hegemony of EuroWestern dualistic thinking and its manifestations (although not disentangleable from a strong inflection of other cultural knowledges, which entanglement delimits some parameters for this radical potential). By bringing herbalist voices and herbalist praxis to the table, this thesis sought to contribute something of the experiential wisdom of herbalists into the developing field of scholarship of that seeks to re-evaluate academic knowledge - and, by implication,

our broader cultural thought and habits - from a plant-informed perspective, deanthropocentrising thought by exposing it to its ecological ground. In this regard, this thesis can be regarded as an effort of working-through, from within, to open the abstract thinking of academic scholarship onto the ecologically structured thinking of herbalist praxis.

After an outline of the theoretical and practical contexts in which the project is situated, I sought to explore in depth herbalist practices of cultivating relationship with plants through material gleaned primarily from interview. Chapter three considered how herbalists create space and remake their worlds as supportive to meaningful relationships with plants and accommodating of plant being and plant knowledge. Beginning with a look at how herbalists create space within their own personal practice, stilling and suspending the structuring impositions of the everyday on the psychological, temporal and material levels, the boundaries between these were seen to be porous; action on one level might have effects or resonance on another. In this way, herbalist practices were understood to enact crossings between different types of space in a way that resonates with the originary poetic gesture at the heart of language. Further to this, herbalist practices of creating supportive collective cultural space were seen to resonate with this spacemaking on an individual level. We saw how, as a tributary of folk or 'traditional knowledge', herbalist plant knowing was historically supported by collectively maintained 'cultural' constructions - what we might regard as poetic spaces, excluded from the narratives of medical history and sanctioned medical knowledge - which were then understood to also be spaces of crossing, sometimes shaped by elements of human and plant being in common. An understanding of our more particularised, abstract, familiar forms of thought and language as emergent from a shared ecological ground offered theoretical support to this insight. In this way, folk herbalism could be understood as a historical site of plant-human cultural co-creation; which interactive culture creation is also recognisable in contemporary

practices of, for example, gardening in collaboration with plants.

Chapter four looked at the ways that herbalists actively engage plants in relationship, considering four elements of herbalist approach to plants. Curiosity was understood to orient and incline us towards the other, creating space for emergence and stemming our habits of foreclosing particularity in advance with our knowledge and predetermining ideas. Defamiliarisation was understood as an active intentional effort to disrupt those structuring frameworks that we bring to the encounter. A common manifestation of this was the meeting of a herb in tea form without knowing what it is. We recognised in this simple practice profound implications for the disruption of the human and of the ordinary world - the 'socialised ego' or the logocentric self - and noted how our familiarity with poetic disruptions of the functionality of words might offer cultural support in this. Intentional herbalist cultivation of sensory acuity and intuition for the purpose of 'listening to plants' was characterised in terms of 'attunement'; a kind of focused and skilled attention. Following herbalists' interpretative leads, we understood how developing attunement is, in fact, an inhabitation of the foundational relationships that are characteristic of our fundamental ecological being-in-common. Finally, the technique of imagining - integral to the movement of creative remaking of the world - was understood to have both projective and perceptive functions in plantwork, offering a tool of connection and a means of bridging with collective realities that can circumvent the constraining dualisms of reality/non-reality, and accordant criteria of belief, of our rationalist paradigm. In this, it was understood to be accordant with the poetic tool of the willing suspension of disbelief, which was discovered to be prevalent in and essential to our everyday functioning.

Chapter five considered how herbalists respond to plants in ways that accommodate and amplify them. Herbalist deployments of the imagination as a tool of perception was found to have an accordant counterpart in the strategy of 'acting

as though', which, understood as a tool of intentional reality creation, was explored in its potential for supporting ethical interaction with the world as ecological through the constrictive bounds of the existent (akin to a stance of intentional recognition). We also saw how selectivity and amplification as tools can help reify these intentional realities, illuminating and reiterating living dynamics, and we saw this at play in herbalist medicine making, where plants' autonomous meanings are brought to the fore, and in herbalist educational efforts. Chapter six explored the function of metaphor and of other forms of more rooted, sensual, 'material' language in herbalist practice and in human relationship to plants more broadly. Metaphor was understood as a vital force within language: able to broaden its scope to accommodate things otherwise excluded; create connection and resonance between disparate things; facilitate empathy and intentional worldmaking, and imbue words with poietic power. Its use as an intentional tool within plantwork (for example in anthropomorphism as a tool of articulation) was understood to derive its potency from the accordance of metaphor with plant forms of self-expression, and its gesturing towards a more fundamental language in common. Other kinds of herbalist weighted words - the performative language of intentions, affirmations and commitments - were seen also have this function and, again, we saw how these accord with plant modes of self-expression.

In all of these ways, herbalist engagement with plants show us what a poetic kind of being in the world looks like in practice, expanding the reach of classic phenomenological conceptions of the poetic to accommodate a deanthropocentred understanding of being. With this understanding of herbalist practices as enactive of a kind of world-disclosing poetic being-towards, the question concerning their implications was shown to have profound answers. The techniques by which herbalists cultivate relationship with plants engender a different epistemological paradigm, blurring the binaries and dualisms that are foundational to EuroWestern thought. These relationships shift the dialogue: from

belief to resonance and proactive connection; from a strict division of reality/non-reality to imaginative perception, reifying action and amplification (or, in other words, poietic worldmaking); from human separation from and domination of nature to continuity and collaboration. Herbalist engagement of plants as collaborators, teachers, kin and allies enacts an intentional responsible stance that opens us up to our ecological ground, through thought and the everyday. In doing so, these practices offer us poetic tools for working through the thought-language-habit-nexus that mediates our relationship with the world to inhabit a space of ecological right relation. These poetic tools are also potent because they are accessible. They engage latent capacities of ecologically participatory world-being that have been historically suppressed, but are ontologically elemental and basic and, moreover, are culturally familiar via their residual endurance in the literary poetic - and thus appropriate for and available to us (inhabitants of a EuroWestern cultural paradigm). Herbalist modes of engagement with plants as living beings involve simple practices - of the senses and of the imagination - that anybody and everybody can (and should) learn. They can help us to admit the kinds of thinking and knowing that plants do and have, into our own, with potentially transformative consequences.

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