

BEING AND BECOMING WITH PLANTS IN SUE BURKE'S *SEMIOSIS*: MORE-THAN-HUMAN VEGETAL RELATIONS

*SER Y DEVENIR CON LAS PLANTAS EN LA NOVELA SEMIOSIS DE SUE
BURKE: RELACIONES VEGETALES MÁS-QUE-HUMANAS*

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ABSTRACT

This article takes up the question of more-than-human communication with the vegetal world, not from the perspective of how to communicate with the plant beings who inhabit the world with us but by asking how an ethical being with plants can alter what it means to be human. In order to do so, I will turn to consider the ways in which Critical Plant Studies address these questions, with a focus on plant communication, before turning to consider the ways in which we can become with the vegetal, and the effects planty entanglements have on our understandings of what it means to be human, and how Sue Burke's 2018 science fiction novel *Semiosis* engages with these questions by bringing to the fore the agency of plants.

Keywords: Plant being, *Semiosis*, more-than-human becoming, vegetal entanglements, plant agency.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la cuestión de la comunicación más que humana con el mundo vegetal, no desde la perspectiva de cómo comunicarse con los seres vegetales que habitan el mundo con nosotras y nosotros, sino desde la perspectiva de cómo estar éticamente con las plantas puede alterar lo que significa ser humano. Para ello, tomo como punto de partida la manera en la que los Estudios Críticos de las Plantas interrogan estas cuestiones, centrándome en la comunicación vegetal, pasando después a considerar cómo podemos llegar a estar con lo vegetal y los efectos que los enredos vegetales tienen en nuestra comprensión de lo que significa ser humano, y cómo la novela de ciencia ficción de Sue Burke de 2018, *Semiosis*, aborda estos temas poniendo de relieve la agencia de las plantas.

Palabras clave: Ser vegetal, *Semiosis*, devenir más que humano, enredos vegetales, agencia vegetal.

1. Introduction

This article takes up the question of more-than-human communication with the vegetal world, not from the perspective of *how* to communicate with the plant beings who inhabit the world with us, but rather, by asking, like Zoë Schlanger does in her research on plant communication, what material modifications would emerge if we were to become attentive to vegetal agency, that is: what would change if we were to accept that plants communicate? (53). In order to do this, I will turn to consider the ways in which Critical Plant Studies address these questions with a focus on plant communication (beyond plant-human interactions), before turning to consider the ways in which we can become *with* the vegetal, and the effects planty entanglements have on our understandings of what it means to be human. Further, I will consider how Sue Burke's 2018 science fiction novel *Semiosis* engages with these questions by bringing to the fore the agency of plants. I argue that by becoming ethically attuned to plants through the recognition of an agency that exceeds human-plant entanglements, anthropocentric ways of being are displaced in favour of mutual thriving. These entanglements are derived specifically from plants' own being and not from their interactions with humans. This becoming *with* the world (Haraway Staying) does not, as the novel illustrates, suggest an unproblematic, naïve, or romanticised understanding of human relations to the natural world. Instead, it offers a human-vegetal society that takes seriously the question of how we might become plant.

Burke's novel engages in "the utopian tactic of estrangement" (Sargisson 205) by centring plant agency and narrative being. The novel's speculative genre is highlighted as the questions asked throughout are not about *how* or even *whether* plants can communicate with humans-as both of these are taken for granted-but rather who we are when we become *with* plants. This is not a question of what Lucy Sargisson identifies as "state-of-nature theories of human nature" as "an assertion of the rationality of [generic] man; the assumption of his capacity to self-improve morally or materially; and the privileging of self-interest as a primary motivation force for rational action" (202). Enacting Sargisson's call to estrangement, in the novel there is no "return" to nature in the sense of an Enlightenment Rousseauian understanding of a masculinist nature-culture binary in which self-interest must be negotiated with the interests of others in order for rational action to take place. Rather, as the novel suggests, separated from Earth by both space and time, as well as their morality and ethics, the humans in the novel become other-than their Earthbound counterparts.

It is far from a dystopian text in which humankind becomes unrecognisable and a “compliant erasure of utopian hope” is concomitant with “restricting transformative desire through managed innovations limited to the terms and conditions of social life as people already know it” (Moylan 166). Rather, the premise of Burke’s novel, that late-stage neoliberal capital has so damaged the Earth that the most hopeful choice they can make is to start over on a new planet, offers a convincing reason for the coloniser’s journey, and serves as a motivational force throughout the generations; the life they build on the planet they name Pax must avoid the pitfalls of the world they left behind. Earth in Burke’s novel resembles “[t]he current global order [which] threatens humanity and all of nature” (Moylan 165), and thus an alternative world, accessible by technology that does not yet exist for contemporary readers, is posited as a means of imagining otherwise. This otherwise works against both a “utopianism of perfection” (Sargisson 201) as well as a dystopian “toxic resignation and complicity” with the current world order (Moylan 166) by offering neither a glossed over and impossible (or improbable) future depressing nor a condemnation of what we, as humans, are. Instead, by depicting a world that is neither extreme-perfection nor ruin-Burke offers “new possibilities out of which critical and transformative visions and practices can emerge” (Moylan 166).

2. Listening for Plants

Sue Burke’s novel *Semiosis* narrates the first hundred years of human colonisers on a planet which is, they come to discover upon arrival, already populated by sentient plants. The novel opens with the colonists’ botanist reflecting that “[t]he war had begun long before we arrived because war was their way of life. It took its first victims among us before we understood what was happening” (1). From the outset, the novel seeks to disrupt anthropocentrism, as the war that had begun long before the Earthlings’ arrival was being waged between vegetal beings: specifically, between two vines that were fighting for dominance of the territory the humans had unwittingly decided would be their new home. Through chapters that shift the narrative perspective, including sections narrated by a bamboo plant, the novel describes the humans’ subsequent attempts to survive the plant war and build a colony that would allow them to not just live but also *thrive* on their new planet, and to fulfil the mission they held upon leaving Earth: to form a “new society in full harmony with nature” (1). The central trope of the novel is not just that plants are sentient, but that they can and do take action, modify their behaviour, communicate, and purposefully aid or punish (sometimes with death) those beings who interfere with their desires. This article interrogates the ways in which becoming plant, following on Deleuze and Guattari, is narrated in Burke’s novel, revealing the importance of an ethics of

being with plants as a means of moving beyond anthropocentric imperatives for future worldings. What Burke's novel reveals is the way in which a reorientation of human-plant relations, with an emphasis on plant agency and ontology, does not lead toward a utopian future, but it does have the potential to open ways of being in and of the world (Haraway *Staying*) that dislodge anthropocentric humanist understandings, asking whose story, whose being, is considered worthy of telling. In line with Schlanger's discussion of plant being, I want to ask what materialities might emerge if we were to become attentive to vegetal agency, that is: how might we change if we were to accept plant communication and agency? (53).

Semiosis enacts these potentialities by narrating the ways in which plants may have much to say *about* us, whether or not they say it *to* us, and this has material implications for the ways in which we understand ourselves as we become attuned to plant communications as a means of remaking the human as more-than-human others. The settlers from Earth have called the new planet Pax, in a gesture toward the peaceful future they hope to have there, as their voyage is motivated by the destruction of the planet Earth as a result of war, conflict, and environmental collapse. The second generation of settlers is lured to an abandoned-by a previous society of beings from outer space-city by a type of rainbow bamboo that, throughout the novel, will begin to communicate with the humans and become integral to their society and survival. This bamboo, later taking the proper name Stevland and adopting male pronouns, attracts them with its rainbow colours and also with the fruit it produces and has chemically modified so as to drug the humans with feelings of happiness and contentment when they eat it. Through this vegetal communication, Stevland entices the humans into relocating to the source because, as an elder colonist says, "[t]he plant wants you dependent, not injured. Very wise choice, addiction...You say the fruit is delicious?" (Burke 66). By describing the plant as "wise", it is, from the outset, characterised as making decisions, not just of bearing fruit, but of bearing fruit with chemical compounds that it has chosen. In search of the source of the fruit, the humans move from their first village, with the warring vines, to the rainbow city, and life becomes infinitely easier for them, as they are better able to stay nourished and to have medicines available because of their proximity to Stevland. As their needs are met by him, so do they 'help' the bamboo as they begin to understand that becoming "allies" with the plant means not just that "[i]t will serve [them]" but that they in turn must "do what it wants" (28). Stevland has, of course, his own wars, desires, and objectives, and the humans are required to make those possible.

In recent years, plant scientists have found increasing evidence for plant communication ability beyond mere response to stimuli. As Nancy Baker has noted, "[w]hat is being discovered, or uncovered, about plant behavior puts plants in their own 'society,' in other words, in their own complete world manifesting their own

remarkable forms of behavior” (148). She notes that among these behaviours, “[t]he research on plants, however, has uncovered many examples of complex learning, memory, and even a kind of planning ahead in plant behavior” (142). I highlight the agentic nature of these behaviours, that is, that these are not a “passive reaction” like a “stimulus-response form of behavior” (142), because it is fundamental to recognise that when plants defend against something, communicate with each other, or even recognise kin (142) these responses can be understood as plant subjectivity beyond behaviours that are “predictable according to the various laws of nature” as posited by scientific theories that would deny plant agency (144). What Baker’s research suggests is that the vegetal world around us is communicating amongst itself, and it is thus not farfetched to consider that it may be possible that these same beings might have something to say about humans. Recognising the communicative capacity of plants as not just asking about what plants say but, as will be discussed below, about how humans respond can lead to a reorientation toward vegetal being and becoming.

The first time that readers are given access to Stevland’s thoughts, he is, as yet, unnamed and has not established a means of communicating with the humans beyond the production of beautiful fronds and addictive fruit. His character, prior to the mutual communication, is revealed as he thinks that “[i]ntelligence wastes itself on animals and their trammelled, repetitive lives” and, yet, because of their proximity to him, and “their irrigation, protection, excretion, and compost” he has become “more than yesterday, bigger, smarter, stronger” (Burke 87). In this depiction of Stevland, as well as the narration of the plant wars in which the vines attacked and poisoned the humans, plants are represented as more than passive objects filling the landscape or objects for human use. Though the humans in the novel do not, at this point, have access to his thoughts or plans, readers are brought to understand that Stevland has plans to build a “rewarding relationship” with the humans, but first he “must communicate with them” (88), and overcome his initial disdain for what he perceives as their inferior intelligence.

For Gagliano et al., “plants can no longer be portrayed as passive organisms merely subjected to environmental circumstances. Instead, they view plants as information-processing organisms with complex communication strategies” (xii). That is, as these same authors note elsewhere, there is an “intrinsic performativity of plants”, starting with “bearing seeds, irrupting in flowers, sprouting rhizomes, uncoiling leaves, attracting pollinators, garnering human attention, and mobilising transnational network” (Vieira, et al., xviii.). In his first attempt at communication, Stevland opts for a visual “display” with “the leaves and stems of thigh-wide, sky-high stalks of bamboo [changing] color, one stalk per color on either side. Red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, indigo, and violet. The bamboo had re-created a rainbow on either side of the road” (Burke 89). Agreeing that “the bamboo seems to want our attention” (91),

having accepted much earlier that it “was smart” (91), the display opens the possibility for human-plant communication. The poetic performance, however, goes beyond the aesthetic toward an integrated and integrating praxis, and as Searle and Turnbull remind us, the importance of “[p]lant thinking [is that it] underscores the necessity and the urgency of ‘multispecies cooperation, cultivation, and care’” in the hope of “[fostering] more liveable futures” (Searle and Turnbull 294). Realising that Stevland’s colourful performance is, in fact, a warning of dangerous animals approaching, the humans are able to defend themselves in time (Burke 103) and Stevland notes that “the foreigners understood my warning and repaid me” (105), opening up the potential for further communication, and the beginnings of a mutually beneficial relationship with a mutually beneficial future.

3. Human-Plant Entanglements

Considering, as John Charles Ryan does, that “[h]uman beings breathe with plants every moment of our lives through a kind of perpetual embodied dialogue” (61), it is possible that we are already engaging in human-plant communicative entanglements, but have been unable, or unwilling, to speak with our planty cohabitants. Indeed, as Michael Marder notes, “[w]e are sure not to hear plants speak if we continue to hold onto the anthropocentric prejudice that sees in our intelligence, cogitation, and languages the gold standards of intelligence, cogitation, and language as such” (104). By becoming attuned to plant communication on their own terms we can, perhaps, displace anthropocentric logics and open ourselves to more ethical ways of being in common. That is, we may be able to move past human-centred understandings of communication, and thus agency, by recognising the ways in which we are already entangled with the vegetal, and paying greater attention to what it is saying.

As mentioned, the bamboo Stevland is one of the narrators of the novel, and at one point describes his relationship with the world around him, notably without mentioning the humans at all: “my roots are spread throughout our valley, and I know that as the day progresses, they will draw in a din of chemical complaints from other plants that increases day by day. [...] Forward-looking plants worry. Our ecosystem is disturbed and angry, as well as thirsty” (Burke 235). The shifting perspective in the novel, to one in which Stevland not only narrates himself, but also creates an ecological community through naming “[o]ur ecosystem” indicates the way in which plant-human boundaries are rendered unstable. In other scenes he describes sending chemicals to other plants to help ward off an invading species. Indeed, he shows “them how to combine urea and malonic acid to make barbituric acid” so as to poison a communal enemy (245). Though this is perhaps an extension beyond what plant scientists have identified in Earth plant species, sharing chemical

compounds and responding to environmental stimuli beyond mere reaction, as Lawrence tells us, “points to the existence of a certain type of sentience, proper to plant life. Terms such as sentience and intelligence, typically reserved for humans and other ‘high-order’ animals, have been extended to the plant kingdom in order to recognise and valorise the remarkable capacities of plants” (635). Stevland and his vegetal companions exhibit both sentience and intelligence, bargaining, plotting, and enacting sophisticated battle plans against an invading species, drawing attention to the ways in which these attributes are not exclusive to humans and, indeed, the colonisers survive in large part because the vegetal world exceeds the humans’ capacity for these same behaviours. In fact, in the encounter, the various vegetal beings are responsible for successfully enacting the plan to drug the “pests” (Burke 243) and the humans are merely auxiliary, picking up the pieces once the communal safety has been ensured.

Though Stevland’s observation in the novel that “oranges are naturally obstinate” (Burke 266) or that tulips are especially stupid and irises are “eager to hunt and kill” (297) may veer into anthropomorphic territory, “[a]s plant neurobiologists have shown, plants very much have interests; they recognise and respond to danger and stress” (Lawrence 638). Thus, as does much speculative fiction, the novel extends existing ideas about what is and what could be into the realm of the potential, and what I will explore going forward is the way in which plant-human interactions alter the colonisers’ understanding of themselves as human, and how the novel rewrites “intimate human-vegetal ecologies [that] are entangled with a long history of colonial scientific expeditions, imperialism, economic extraction, capitalist accumulation, globalization, and cultural appropriation” (Szczygielska and Cielemeńska 2). In order to move beyond bare subsistence, the colonial endeavour on Pax that the humans enact must discard notions of *terra nullius* and coloniser-colonised relations of dominance in favour of mutual becoming.

The importance of these relational futures extends far beyond understanding the human-vegetal entanglement as a material one. Certainly, “[h]umans depend on the vegetal world in a fundamental way: for food, animal feed, medicines, clothing, fuel, and shelter, intoxication and stimulation, as well as mediating deep cultural and social meanings flourishing in arts and aesthetics. Plants for their part use humans as pollinators to colonize new territories” (Szczygielska and Cielemeńska 4). There is always, already, an entanglement between the human and the plant, such that the two are, rather than separate, engaged in a process of mutual becoming that extends to the very beginning of what we might call human, with the vegetal preceding the human by millennia. As Métis scholar Warren Cariou notes: “Indigenous philosophies of language and belonging reverse the trajectory of Western mimesis, starting with the land as the source of not only sustenance but also of knowledge” (341). That

is, ontologies of the human self are imbricated with plant ontologies and recognise that one is not possible without the other, and that plant epistemologies not only exist but enable human epistemologies. As Stevland asks, “for what am I without memory but mere grass? But what am I without pollen to communicate, without nectar to trade with moths for the bits they gather for me, without seeds and spores to disseminate ideas, without roots to touch from grove to grove, without lenses to see, without crystals to sense electric waves?” (Burke 88). Through the novel’s progression, Stevland’s connection and communication with the world around him, as well as his memory, which reaches far beyond the humans’ time on the planet, extends the human connection as well, enabling the colonisers to think with the plants and animals around them.

For Lawrence, “[t]hinking with plants pushes us away from taking the individual as the locus of ethics, inviting us to think through life as connection, and the experience of living as multiple, contingent and changing” (637). A similar urgency to recognise more than human entanglements is articulated by Kim Tallbear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), when stating that “human bodies, networks, and place all propagate into one other, thus perhaps making it more difficult to say what is life and what is not” (np). The question becomes how to recognise plant life, not just as a biological category but as an ontological one. And when we do so, to ask how we can become *with* plants. This urgency is especially salient for the colonists in their desire to forge a future on their new planet, one that inhabits the world “the Pax way, not the Earth way, because we know what the Earth way was like” (119).

4. Plant Ethics

As the plants in the novel are imbued with their own motivations and histories that exceed human-plant interactions, plant agency is brought to the fore. For Rosiek and Snyder, “reserving qualities such as purpose and character exclusively for humans is itself a form of recentering human subjectivity by reserving a special status for humans (e.g., only human agents have purposes)” (4). Undoing this special status in the novel occurs in part through the rapid acceptance of Stevland and other plants as intelligent beings, wherein what is up for debate is less plant intelligence and more the human role within planty-relations. If at first the idea that the humans could be at war with the plants, or that plants could war amongst themselves, was unfathomable because “[i]t’s only vines and trees” (Burke 25), the way the vegetal world is described quickly alters, so that a plant is said to have developed “a plan that required conspicuous effort on its part” indicating that it had “[c]reative, original ideas and perseverance” and these were “signs of intelligence – real intelligence, insightful” intelligence (29). Throughout the novel, the humans come to accept that on Pax there are “[h]elpful, talkative

plants with a sophisticated appreciation of abstract ideas” that leads them, both plants and humans, toward an increasing desire for “cross-species communication” (122). As mentioned, the first indication that Stevland wants to *communicate* with the colonisers comes after he changes colour – an act he perceives as basic enough for even the humans to understand, and one of the humans notes that it “looks like a shout” and that “the plant has a lot to say” (92). Interestingly, the humans can explain the scientific reasons for a change in colour but what the majority are interested in is not *what* was happening, but *why*. That is, asking “What did it want?” (92-93) and attributing to the plant the capacity for desire that exceeds stimulus response. The questions are later answered as Stevland learns to communicate not only through changing colours and sizes, but by literally learning to write. His main stem is given its own house, and when the humans want to talk to him, they can go visit, and his answers are “[w]ords [which] form on the stem. Thousands of cells twitched tiny beads of pigment into view” (135). Worth noting is that Stevland’s greater communicative capacity with the humans is not a result of his own increasing intelligence, but rather of increasing intelligibility for the humans. He is never shown as having difficulty understanding the humans, instead it is the humans whose intelligence appears to be much more static, and Stevland as capable of greater plasticity.

Plant scientist Michael Marder argues that “[f]or scientists, ‘language’ means ‘communication,’ which, in turn, signifies ‘transfer of information’ in the shape of biochemical, electrical, and other kinds of signals. As a result, plants are conceived of as emitters and receivers of information” (117). Because the humans already accept the sentience and intelligence of the plant Stevland, his communicating is not a mystery for the humans, rather, what they try to determine is how to respond. The initial stages of the human-vegetal entanglement lead them to recognise that they “were being observed. Trained. Rewarded. Evaluated” (Burke 93) and they enter into a more tacit relationship, by becoming-plant (Deleuze and Guattari) and adopting the behaviours that Stevland could recognise as ‘trainable.’ Part of this involves learning “[a] language of flowers” (Burke 97) that extends the very understanding of language beyond spoken utterances or bodily movement.

Plant communication, of course, is not a new idea. For Cariou, in many Indigenous ontologies, “learning the language of the land is a matter of survival” (341) and it is necessary “to attune ourselves to the forms of intimate knowledge that are transmitted to us through, for example, the taste of blueberries or the scent of sage” (341-342). The intimate knowledge transmitted by a blueberry, or the various fruits Stevland produces, is incorporated into the bodily being of the one consuming it. This understanding of knowledge transfer between species is also seen in Stacy Alaimo’s theorisation of viscous porosity. For the theorist, this involves “understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment [and] marks a

profound shift in subjectivity” (20). This occurs precisely through the incorporation of the other and the “interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world” (142). It is important to note that the planty becoming narrated in the novel does not involve a grafting of plants to humans, nor vice versa. It is not that the humans develop stamens or leaves, nor that the plants grow livers or ears (beyond analogues they might already possess). This is worth noting as, in a discussion of another plant-human relations novel, Jeff Noon’s *Pollen*, readers of *Semiosis* are not confronted with what Cockin terms “perhaps [the] most destabilizing idea explored in *Pollen* [which] is the transformation of the body through the intervention of vegetation” (100). Beyond ingesting the fruits that Stevland and his plant brethren produce, the humans in the novel retain their corporeality, while a reciprocal bodily knowledge is formed.

This intimate knowledge and interchange can be seen as Stevland produces “fruit tailored for specific individuals to cure infections or cease childbirth or provide extra nutrients or enzymes, among so many other things” (Burke 140). In return, the humans come to view bodily waste as a “gift” they give him, and individual toilets do not exist, in favour of “gift centres” where excrement is deposited to nurture Stevland. At one point a character is said to have been “shocked giftless” indicating the way in which their language mirrors their change in consciousness (253). Thus, the incorporation of the other is foregrounded and forms the basis for the mutualistic relationship the colonisers enjoy, such that their relationship is defined by Stevland as “mutualism” (266). The recognition of the interconnected matrix, the mutual dependence and benefit and response-ability (Haraway *Awash*) inherent to their being with each other extends the posthuman behaviour of the colonisers, as I will discuss, beyond themselves and their being with Stevland. That is, as Donna Haraway suggests in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, they become *with* the world.

5. Becoming with Plants

For Simone Bignall and Ngarrindjeri scholar Daryle Rigney, “posthumanism recognises the rightfully limited powers of human agency: the ways in which human action is, or should be, subject to other agencies operating – often reciprocally – in complex networks of existence” (166). This posthuman recognition permits the extension of the “complex networks of existence” toward other beings with whom the colonisers share the planet, including a society of ‘alien’ (in that they too came from a different planet) beings whose corporeal form, modes of expression, and social organisation more closely resemble what on Earth would be considered insects than ‘humans.’ Despite their differences, upon coming into contact with these others,

whom they call Glassmakers because they had brought this technology to the planet, the Pax humans focus on the commonalities between them, believing that “we’re a lot alike” (Burke 193) and the human narrator notes “I couldn’t make those noises. They probably couldn’t make mine. But we could learn to listen” (196). Indeed, for the Pax humans, recognition of difference and ‘learning to listen’ are inherent to their social order. Acceptance that “[p]lants think differently and you have to allow for that” (173) goes beyond the basic premise that plants *are* different, however, by taking for granted that plants (and thus other beings) *think*. For Lawrence, “redefining consciousness, sentience and intelligence from the plant up – as an appropriate responsiveness to the lived environment – frees animals and humans alike from anthropocentric, phallogocentric and ableist determinations of these terms” (636). Through the recognition of plant intelligence, the humans become increasingly posthuman, and as Vine Deloria Jr further notes in a discussion of more-than-human agency, “the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related” (3). This relatedness does not, of course, imply that the new planet is an unproblematic or utopian place.

As mentioned earlier, the colonists arrived believing that they “would live in harmony with nature, and nature was always in harmony” (Burke 31) and that they “could come in peace and find a happy niche in another ecology” (33). However, these Romantic views of nature as peaceful, harmonious, and, specifically, one in which humans could “find a happy niche” rely on an understanding of nature as *opposed* to culture, and thus, of nature as a passive object upon which the humans can simply act and impose their will. They must come to recognise Stevland and the other plant beings as *alive*, not just in the sense of biological organisms, but, as Serpil Oppermann notes: “Being alive in many ways means that ordinary matter is not a static or inert entity but has a creative and expressive agentic capacity with internal experience and signifying power” (3). What moves the colonisers beyond seeing the vegetal as “disposable things, mute materials, unsensing automatons, or aesthetic objects” (Ryan 61) is recognising the ways in which plants have their own narrative agencies. Instead, by accepting the various desires of plants, for example that “Stevland has always wanted power, to be the biggest and smartest bamboo in the history of Pax and to have the best service animals ever” (Burke 150), the hierarchical positioning of the humans as those who shape and control vegetal life is disrupted. And yet, it is this disruption that enhances their being, as with Stevland’s help (he is, for example, the “negotiator with plants and crops” and has thus “made himself essential” (142)) the city thrives, and this “has allowed the younger generations to create in ways we could not imagine” (146). Thus, by becoming Stevland’s “service animal”, Pax humans are able to move beyond the mere subsistence that shaped the initial settlers to become producers of knowledge,

art, music, and other forms of thriving. As Marder notes, “[i]t is crucial to understand that, [plants] *form* a world, by which they, themselves, are shaped. The world is neither an empty container for reality nor the seemingly unlimited stuff it contains; rather, its character is deeply relational, dependent on the interconnections between the beings that populate it” (122). By becoming-with Stevland and their more-than-human surroundings, the humans are able to fully participate in the “deeply relational” world they inhabit.

In Valentina Romanzi’s reading of Burke’s novel, “humans ‘import’ peace to the planet, and pacifism is transmitted to Stevland as a core value of the human colony” (353). The relationality, thus, is depicted not as a reversal of plant-human relations, in which the plant is a beneficent and condescending carer for the humans, but instead as a reciprocal arrangement for all. Indeed, as Stevland learns “that leadership is not violence. Force is violence. Mutualism involves trust” (Burke 178), he is able to “declare [him]self a citizen of the Commonwealth of Pax” (174). He is able, through the act of communication, to perform something of a speech act which, in the very declaration, brings him into being as a citizen. With this, he can then take up a position of governance that helps him “discover the compromises of social living” (175). For Romanzi, then, “Burke’s narrative choices, protagonists, narrators, and storyworld all point towards an intention to build a posthuman ecosystem, where the human is displaced in favor of a post-anthropocentric perspective” (357). This displacement is contingent upon the recognition of agency as not just reserved for humans, as “reserving qualities such as purpose and character exclusively for humans is itself a form of recentring human subjectivity by reserving a special status for humans” (Rosiek and Snyder 4). The fact that Stevland’s speech act, which occurs through the aforementioned writing on his own stalk, is able to constitute him as a member of the community suggests that for the Pax people, the ways and means of becoming a citizen are flexible enough to account for the vegetal. Subjectivity, the ability to declare oneself a subject, is not reserved merely for the humans and this capaciousness means that the citizen-human construct no longer holds and the “special status” no longer taken for granted.

Forgoing the “special status for humans” and becoming with plants does not, as mentioned, lead to a world without conflict, hardship, or immorality, nor is the peace the humans import unequivocally upheld. Indeed, when, 100 years after arriving on Pax, the humans are attacked by the Glassmakers (who, in abandoning their social contract with Stevland became unhealthy, warlike, and desperate), there are humans whose first impulse is to commit genocide because “[t]hey’re not citizens, [...] so we can do what we want” (310). Indeed, it is Stevland who, insisting on the “mutualism” he identifies as key to human-vegetal relationships, advocates for what he terms “the Pax way: peaceful, proper, reasonable” (305). Though the question of what is “proper”

or “reasonable” is often defined by the supposed victors in any conflict, the mutual becoming between Stevland and the humans is underscored here as he attempts to use their own ideals and reasoning to convince them. The final confrontation between the Glassmakers and the humans ends with multiple casualties on either side, underscoring that the posthuman existence is not without its own ethical conundrums, and “the Pax way” is a constant negotiation for the ability to survive. That is, neither extreme of violence nor pacifism will suffice.

6. Conclusions

As an initial approach to the questions that arise when thinking about plant agency, *Semiosis* offers a fertile space for exploring what happens when, as Marder writes, “the anthropocentric prejudice that sees in our intelligence, cogitation, and languages [as] the gold standards of intelligence, cogitation, and language as such” (104) is disrupted. Indeed, the novel explores what happens when we hear plants communicate and are open to the human-vegetal entanglements that can emerge. Indeed, it is worth bearing in mind that “[t]he assumption that to have a language is to be able to speak is both erroneous and unethical. Its mistaken premise is thoroughly anthropocentric, insofar as it ties linguistic phenomena to the voice, which only humans possess, and grants other creatures the right to speak only on the condition that they ventriloquize quasi-, proto-, or post- human voices” (Marder 113). In Burke’s novel, Stevland does not have a voice *per se*, communicating as he does through image, scent, shapes and forms, and a sort of writing, however the novel posits a post-anthropocentric community that is not premised on the “right to speak” as dependent upon having a voice. Stevland undeniably has language, and this ability to communicate bridges the gap between himself and the humans, creating an environment in which their failure to attend to him will not only limit their ability to survive, but also to thrive. However, far from offering a utopian depiction of nature, the novel envisions the multiple tensions that emerge when plant agency is taken seriously. These tensions serve not as a road map for human-plant relations, but rather as ways of opening ourselves up to potentially planty being with the world.

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