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Companion Plant Reading: Translating Vegetal Voices

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ABSTRACT

Combining Donna Haraway's call to acknowledge non-human significant others in her *Companion Species Manifesto* with the 'biocentric form of literary criticism'[1] advocated by critical plant studies, this essay uses the agricultural practice of companion planting as a Framework for reading beyond the canon of anglicised world literature. I analyse three short stories – Sofie Isager Ahl's 'Naboplanter' ('Companion Plants', 2018), Can Xue's '鸡仔的心愿' ('Chick's Heart's Desire', 2020) and Audrey R. Hollis' 'Seedlings' (2018) – that translate between the botanical and the human realms and use vegetal voices to challenge gendered social conventions, linguistic preconceptions and lingering anthropocentrism. By planting together texts in Chinese, Danish and English intermingled with the idiom of plants, I propose messy, multimodal and multilingual translation as a fundamental figuration in our pursuit of a planetary approach to comparative literature.

KEYWORDS

Critical plant studies, queer, translation, posthuman feminism, companion planting

When we understand these styles, we can make the plant of literary composition grow, roots, leaves, and all, in the garden of literature.

–Liu Xie. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons,* translated by Vincent Yu-chung Shih.

ESSY TRANSLATION AND PLANETARY LITERATURE

In their aim to move beyond anthropocentrism and pursue a more planetary approach to comparative literature,[2] contemporary scholars have looked to ecology and companion species for inspiration. Writer and literary scholar Wu Mingyi 吳明益 describes the development of nature writing in Taiwan

1 Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira, 'Introduction', p. xi.

2 For conceptualisation of planetary comparativism and planetary world literature, see Elias and Moraru (eds), *The Planetary Turn*; and Nuttall, 'World Literature as Planetary Literature'.

and elsewhere as a movement away from backgrounding or othering the natural environment and towards a biocentric (生態中心) form of narrative where 'other living organisms (生物) are all seen as human companions (夥伴) in evolutionary history'.[3] Following this trend, I am inspired by the agricultural practice of companion planting to read together three short stories that translate between the botanical and the human realms and use vegetal voices to challenge gendered social conventions, linguistic preconceptions and persistent human biases. By planting together texts in Chinese, Danish and English intermingled with the idiom of plants, I propose messy, multimodal and multilingual translation as a fundamental figuration in our pursuit of a planetary approach to comparative literature.

Reiterating philosopher Rosi Braidotti's call to understand the subject as 'a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole',[4] translation scholar Michael Cronin argues that such a 'transversal subjectivity obviously demands translation if the relatedness is to be anything other than simple contiguity'.[5] While Braidotti mentions humans among other animals, I should like to look a little further than our immediate 'genetic neighbours' and focus on the vegetal components of transversal subjectivity. Although plant morphology and ways of life differ from how we animals look and function, our DNA is made up of the same basic building blocks (adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G), or thymine (T)), albeit differently ordered and proportioned, and the evolutionary paths of various plants and animals are deeply entangled. Still, understanding and engaging with such radically different types of being is not without challenges, and this is where translation as a mode of thought can help. Cronin goes on to 'stress the (in)humanity of translation, its capacity as a form of thought to engage with questions of meaning, representation and transformation across lines of radical difference between the human and the non-human'.[6] Indeed, a 'human' is itself a porous category as the modern human – *Homo sapiens*, the most widespread species of primate on the planet– is just one type of hominin (albeit the only surviving one)

3 Wu, *Taiwan ziran shuxie de tansuo 1980–2002*, p. 365. My translation.

4 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 82.

5 Cronin, 'The (in)humanity of translation', p. 197.

6 Ibid.

and still carries genes from extinct hominins (notably from *H. neanderthalensis*) thanks to extensive interbreeding in our collective past.[7]

If we think of translation as a form of engagement across such 'lines of radical difference', it becomes a useful framework for analysing how texts in human languages give voice to plant characters in a way that helps keep the interspecies and the interlingual in focus. Firstly, translation underlines the *practice* of reading – the subjective and situated context of any reading, including the lingering anthropocentrism and linguistic limitations that need to be acknowledged and challenged at every turn. Secondly, a translational focus highlights how the way we think about plants is shaped by the languages we think in. Analysing and comparing texts in Danish, Chinese and English, I include translations of important terms and titles in all three languages to emphasise this fact. Finally, translation affords a mode of writing with plants that acknowledges plant agency as well as the fact that the plants are not representing themselves directly, but are mediated by human perceptions and languages.

To structure this cross-species, cross-language comparison, I use the metaphor of companion planting. Companion planting (naboplantning, 同伴种植) is the practice of growing plants of different species in close proximity, so that they might benefit from the environmental adaptations of their neighbours. This has been practised by humans for millennia across the globe, and one of the oldest known combinations still in use today is the 'three sisters': sweet corn, bean and gourd.[8] In this matrix, the bean takes advantage of the sturdy cornstalks to grow quicker and higher, the big leaves of the gourd shade the ground and keep it moist, while the beans fix nitrogen in the soil by a microbe-mediated process that makes the otherwise strongly bound chemical element available as a nutrient for all three plant species. Together, these 'ecosystem services'[9] are more varied and effective than those provided within a monoculture.

I couple the agricultural notion of companion planting with the feminist idea of companion species. As conceptualised by feminist

7 Britannica, 'Hominin'.

8 Landon, 'The "how" of the Three Sisters'.

9 Amoabeng, Johnson and Gurr, 'Natural enemy enhancement and botanical insecticide source', p. 13.

scholar Donna Haraway, companion species 'must include such organic beings as rice, bees, tulips and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is – and vice versa'.[10] It is a way of rethinking humanity as an entangled species rather than an exceptional one and recognising that '[b]eings do not preexist their relatings'.[11] This fundamental entanglement of relatings can help us explore not only what it means to be human but what it means to be a species or indeed an individual. The boundaries of the individual person become more dynamic when we realise that the oxygen we breathe and much of the food that fuels and builds our very bodies is produced inside vegetal bodies and can only become truly part of the human structure with the aid of gut bacteria helping us digest it. As biologists Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp and Alfred I. Tauber so neatly put it, 'neither humans, nor any other organism, can be regarded as individuals by anatomical criteria'.[12] The human body itself can usefully be seen as an ecological superstructure: a habitat for as well as a participant in companion species relatings.

The framework of companion planting is not a new methodology but rather a device to make certain aspects of thematic comparative readings explicit. The texts I plant together are not meant to be representative of any language or national literature – they are individual stories that, like the gourd or the bean, help one another grow in the reading and bring their own linguistic, cultural and historical contexts to the field of comparative literature. The framework underlines that, as with companion planting, these texts are brought together artificially in order to speak to the relevant theme. By using translation as a guiding practice and metaphor, the interaction between species, texts and languages is understood as an ongoing process and negotiation. On the one hand, it underscores an imbalance of power in that, despite engaging with multiple species, the human bias persists in the dominance of human narrators, and despite reading multiple languages, the language of analysis is English. On the other hand, by always situating the human or the Anglophone perspective as something that has been translated, it opens these powerful positions to reinterpretation. Though companion planting may appear to be a human exploitation of plant behaviour, nature writer Michael

10 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 15.

11 Ibid., p. 6.

12 Gilbert, Sapp and Tauber, 'A symbiotic view of life', p. 327.

Pollan argues that, throughout our coevolution, plants have likewise lured, induced and refined their animal counterparts to pollinate, protect and even care for them;[13] and literary scholar Joela Jacobs has termed vegetal ways of shaping human culture phytopoetics.[14]

The notion that human beings can be trained by vegetal agency is precisely the point of departure for Sofie Isager Ahl's 'Naboplanter' ('Companion Plants', 2018). Here, plant characters teach the story's human narrator[15] how to care for them through tactile forms of communication. In the second story, Can Xue's "鸡仔的心愿' ('Chick's Heart's Desire', 2020), the zisu plant protagonist establishes a form of sensory communication with the human narrator through its powerful minty scent. In both instances, the sensory forms of plant-human communication are then translated into human languages and into a larger ecological context. In the final story, Audrey R. Hollis' 'Seedlings', the human narrator slowly grows more and more cactus-like as her body becomes the ground for a radical companion planting that stimulates alternative sexualities and forms of reproduction. Although narrated from human perspectives, the vine, zisu and cactus are literary characters with the agency to shape both the narrative and the form of narration. Indeed, these are stories *with*, rather than *about*, plants, to use the distinction Frederike Middelhoff and Arnika Peselmann make in their introduction to vegetal narrative cultures. Each text adds its own take on how to translate plant-human companionship in ways that highlight interspecies communication and care.

TRAINED BY VINES

Sofie Isager Ahl's 'Naboplanter' (同伴植物, 'Companion Plants', 2018) describes the human protagonist's sojourn in a vineyard, learning how to care for grapevines, the story's vegetal protagonists, through a series of short vignettes. These explore the relationship and similarities between the human and plant protagonists in terms of their corporeality and the ecological circuits centred around water, air and sun in which they participate.

13 Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, p. xv.

14 Jacobs, 'These lusting, incestuous, perverse creatures', p. 603.

15 For study of plant narrators, see Erin James, 'What the plant says'.

From early in the narrative, a bodily relationship between plant and human is explored and similarities invoked: 'White fingers, fragile against the branches, cold (Hvide fingre, skrøbelige mod grenene, kolde).'[16] Despite their role of caring for the vines, the hands are described as the more fragile of the two, and it remains unclear whether the final adjective 'cold' refers to fingers or branches. The sentence hints at a relationship of interdependence as well a likeness that suggests reciprocity and mutuality. Rather than the plant acting as the non-human Other, as is often the case in modern and contemporary fiction,[17] the grapevine and the human are portrayed as analogous beings with finger-branches engaging their shared space. The local winegrower continues this parallel between bodies and recalls the Dionysian association of wine with blood popularised by Christianity when she states that '[t]he plant juice is like the blood of the vine (plantesaften er som vinstokkens blod)'.[18]

Humans and vines share more than an outward likeness in bodily forms and fluids: they are both beings that depend on, and consist of, water. As feminist scholar Astrid Neimanis proposes, humanity's watery origins and existence can be understood as a fundamental and continuous entanglement with other species and with the planet itself:

> Water irrigates us, sustains us, comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh … its inclusions are intentionally abundant; counted here are not only humans and other animals, plants, fungi, protoctists, but also geological and meteorological bodies such as oceans, rivers, aquifers, subterranean streams, clouds, storms, swamps and soils – all dripping or tidal or damp. With this list, the idea of what a body is becomes productively, posthumanly, torqued.[19]

A similar view of water as the medium through which all life is connected is explored in 'Naboplanter' when the protagonist makes her supplication '[m]ay all the water we evaporate, condense and fall on us again (må alt det vand, vi fordamper, fortættes og falde over os igen)'.[20]

16 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 12. All quotes from this short story are in my own translation with the original quote given afterwards.

17 See Keetley and Tenga (eds), *Plant Horror*; Møller-Olsen, 'Growing together'; Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*.

18 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', pp. 9–10. This parallel between plant (especially arboreal) and human bodies is a trope in many contemporary ecocritical texts along with plants as sensory extensions of the self – see Møller-Olsen, 'Trees keep time'.

19 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, p. 27.

20 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 25.

Water is something we borrow and give back, something we share and something that connects us bodily with other species, other parts of the Earth and other eras of planetary history (as well as other parts of the solar system, since at least part of Earth's water arrived via ice-covered asteroids or comets).[21]

Neimanis calls this the 'hydrocommons of wet relations' and, in Ahl's work, water does indeed integrate the human and plant protagonists with their environment. It is the first of three fundamental plant-human connections that Ahl draws our attention to through her use of the first-person plural: 'This wonderful rain that covers the land in a whisper, makes us silent, receptive (Denne vidunderlig regn, der hviskende dækker landet, gør os tavse, modtagelige)'.[22] The rain feeds the land and all the beings that live on it (including grapevines and humans), muddying diverse species into a grateful *us*.

In 'Naboplanter,' the process of pruning and tying in the vines brings changes not only to the plant but to the protagonist as well: 'I become quicker and quicker in my ability to tie in the vines … Four buds fall as a result of my clumsy movements (Jeg bliver hurtigere og hurtigere til at binde vinstokkene op … Fire knopper falder af i min kluntede bevægelse)'.[23] Through this drastic form of tactile communication, the plant teaches her how to care for it by letting its buds drop off when she is not doing it right. Over time, the protagonist's body learns how. This form of communication might not be completely intentional, but it is still effective, and it benefits both species in their companion efforts. Reminiscent of Pollan's argument that plants have successfully induced various animals such as bees and humans to help spread their genes,[24] Ahl suggests that, not only do the vines play just as important a role in creating a good growing environment as the people do, but in some instances it seems that humans are merely the vines' servants to be instructed and trained: 'one has to view the plants as information, they are signs, they can be read, they tell you how the soil fares (man må se planterne som information, de er tegn, de kan læses, de fortæller,

21 For a study of inter-planetary hydrocommons in contemporary fiction, see Møller-Olsen, 'Space Oceans'.

22 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 28.

23 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', pp. 13–14.

24 Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, p. xv.

hvordan jorden har det)'.[25] The grapevines become mediators between the people and the land, extending human perception deeper into the soil and providing valuable information about ecological conditions. Recalling philosopher Luce Irigaray's dictum that the plant's 'way of growing is the word of its existence',[26] the medium of this tactile message is the materiality of the plant itself.

Air is the second interconnection that Ahl points out in her examination of plants as humanity's ultimate companion species. She acknowledges our debt to the earliest land plants who, 350 million years ago, created a new balance in the atmosphere with lower CO_2 levels and set the scene for the first terrestrial animals[27] when she writes that '[t]he forest is one big exhalation (skoven er en stor udånding)'.[28] The exhalation of our companion plants provides the oxygen we need for our inhalation, and we exhale carbon dioxide for them in a fundamental and intimate life-giving exchange.

The third shared basis of existence is the conversion and recycling of energy that begins with sunlight. Plants photosynthesise light into fibres that humans eat and digest, after which human bodies produce (and ultimately become) food for the plants in a cycle of metabolic energy conversion often labelled 'burning' (forbrænding, 三焦): 'The sun is blinding. We are burning (Solen er blændende. Vi brænder)',[29] Ahl writes. Described here in a more negative vocabulary, the sun is also a source of danger to both plants and people, a danger that they can protect one another from, as humans use tall plants as well as fabric from plant fibres to create shade for themselves and their crops or, from a vegetal perspective, sun-tolerant plants shade and protect other nearby and useful species. As critical plant scholars Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari remind us, plants 'oblige us to come to terms with our own vulnerability in the face of processes of ecological, social, political and intellectual change, and, often, with our profound, complex dependence on the very forms of life that we are least inclined (or

25 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 11.
26 Irigaray, 'What the vegetal world says to us', p. 130.
27 Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira, 'Introduction', p. vii.
28 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 61.
29 Ahl, 'Naboplanter', p. 71.

simply unable) to acknowledge'.[30] In Ahl's 'Naboplanter', companion plants are described as chemically interdependent on, and fundamentally similar to, their human collaborators. They function as sensory extensions that provide information about the environment, and they complement human efforts as fellow distributers in the hydrocommons of wet relations. Finally, plants are recognised as the providers of essential resources for human survival including water, air and nutritional energy. Living and working closely with plants not only increases productivity, but educates the human body and reminds us of a subtle yet fundamental interdependence that underlies our very existence. In the specific context of the vineyard, it also raises the question of who has domesticated whom.

PLANT NAMES SMELL LIKE HOME

In Can Xue's 残雪 short story '鸡仔的心愿' ('Chick's Heart's Desire', Kylles ønskedrøm, 2020), the human narrator Chick (鸡仔) learns about himself and his role in the larger ecosystem from a zisu or perilla plant, much as Ahl's protagonist is trained by grapevines. Where interspecies communication is tactile in 'Naboplanter', here the main sense involved is smell and it is the zisu's minty scent that is its main contribution to the companion planting as it discourages predation from most animals but appeals to the human palate, inducing humans to care for it, provide it with water and eliminate vegetal competition. The fact that its human companions value zisu for its smell is apparent in its many popular names. Besides 紫苏 pronounced *zisu* in standardised Mandarin, the plant protagonist of the story has many other names including 桂荏 (guiren), 白苏 (baisu) and 赤苏 (chisu) with a plethora of pronunciations in various Chinese languages and dialects. English names include purple perilla, purple shiso, Chinese basil, beefsteak plant, perilla mint and, in Danish, it is variously known as kinesisk/japansk/koreansk bladmynte (Chinese/Japanese/Korean leaf-mint) as well as *shiso* – the transliterated Japanese name. While the plant's official botanical name *Perilla frutescens* is useful for global identification, it embodies a history of empire entwined with the history of plant hunters that 'discovered'

30 Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*, p. 2.

plants across the world, brought them to Europe, and named them using their own writing system.[31] Translation scholar Darryl Sterk comments on the dilemma of the translator forced to navigate between the global imperialist legacy of botanical nomenclature, on the one hand, and local linguistic inequalities and silenced pluralities of everyday language, on the other, when it comes to translating bionyms. He concludes that there are no easy solutions for how to represent the natural world in writing and that 'naming the creature at all is in some sense imperialistic (for what name would the butterflies themselves use?)'.[32] As for what a plant would call itself, we would probably need a new definition of language relying on other, multiple sensory modes besides sound,[33] for, as Irigaray has pointed out, '[a] plant says what it is, and its way of growing is the word of its existence'.[34] A pioneer in the philosophical discussion of plant languages, Michael Marder clarifies that 'what we are dealing with is not the classical relation between a signifier – that is, the word *plant*, or the symbolic structure it participates in – and the corresponding signified, prelinguistic concept, but an interchange between two languages: the biosemiotics of vegetal life and human signification. Whether we are mindful of this or not, whatever we know about plants is due to a successful translation from the former to the latter, a translation that never exhausts or depletes but, on the contrary, enriches what it translates'.[35] Considering how to translate plant names and experiences into human languages clearly provides interesting insights, not only about vegetal ways of life and human preconceptions of these, but

31 For an overview of scholarship on botany and empire, see Batsaki, Cahalan and Tchikine, 'Introduction'.

32 Sterk, 'An ecotranslation manifesto', p. 131.

33 For more on literary sensory studies in relation to plants, see Møller-Olsen, 'The nose: Flora nostalgia'.

34 Irigaray, 'What the vegetal world says to us', p. 130. Prue Gibson and Catriona Sandilands argue that, rather than saying what they are, 'plants perform in their own interests, as part of a multispecies network of performativity in which, for example, showiness, smelliness, and eventfulness combine in specific ways to bring about desired ends such as pollination. ('Introduction: Plant performance', p. 2).

35 Marder, 'To hear plants speak', p. 109.

also about the process of translation as a creative collaboration that conveys, reproduces and *co-produces* meaning.[36]

The understanding that a plant 'says what it is' also highlights something else that the botanical name obscures, namely that plants develop in relationship with their surroundings and so, in a sense, say not only what but *where* they are. For example, the leaves of a purple perilla will be greener and less purple if grown in shady conditions, although its human name does not change. While Marder describes translation as a basic condition of plant-human interaction and something that *enriches*, Sterk highlights the risks of *impoverishing* the diversity of bionyms that reflect daily plant-human entanglements across the globe. He councils that in order to avoid 'mass bionym extinction … translators should do their part to maintain terminological diversity by balancing the local and the global, the common and the scientific in translations of bionyms'.[37] Although there probably is no single, simple pathway to achieving this, awareness of the multiple bionyms of a plant in both source and target languages is a beginning. Another radical strategy advocated by literary scholar Emily Apter might prove useful in this context as well. Invoking an ecological vocabulary, she suggests that '*not* translating becomes a means of recognizing and negotiating singularities as part of geographies of aesthetic and cultural difference', countering the field of 'world literature's endorsement of translatability as a sign of global currency', which risks imperilling 'efforts to read against the grain of global monoculture'.[38] Not translating a plant's name would help create awareness of that plant's situatedness in a particular soil and a particular language. In the case of Chinese that would mean not only transliterating the official Mandarin pronunciation but perhaps choosing the dialect of the story's locale, which might not have a sanctioned transliteration system or might be beyond the linguistic catalogue of the translator.[39] In the following, I will refer to

36 Isabel Kranz, for example, pays specific attention to how 'flowers emerge as meaningful signs that are claimed in the service of both science and sentimentality' ('The language of flowers in popular culture and botany', p. 195).

37 Sterk, 'An ecotranslation manifesto', p. 128.

38 Apter, 'Untranslatability and the geopolitics of reading', p. 195.

39 This is the case in this essay, where all Chinese characters are transliterated using *pinyin* – the official transcript of standardised Mandarin in the PRC and the system with which I am most familiar.

Can Xue's plant protagonist as *zisu* and ask the reader to keep in mind all the plurality of names behind the name, the plant-human relationships they signify, as well as the possibility that the plant may recognise itself and its kin by a completely different kind of biochemical code.

In Can Xue's story, the protagonist, Chick, visits Mama Yuan and her grandson Nigu in the countryside. Here, he discovers an affinity for the minty smelling herb zisu in a budding companionship that corresponds to other interspecies relationships in the story, most importantly that between the local wolves and Nigu's family. Nigu originally came to the village to look after his grandmother in her old age, at least, as he explains,

> 'that's how I saw it to begin with. Later, I discovered that this is how I want to live. Still later I discovered that no one needs looking after. While walking in the woods, Grandma found those wolves. And really… well, those wolves were only around because of Grandma.' Nigu's words made me think of eels and zisu ('来的时候，我妈说你是为了保护奶奶才住在唐村的。　起先我是这样想的。后来我发现这才是我要过的日子。再后来又发现没人需要保护。奶奶在林子里走来走去，寻找那些狼。其实啊，那些狼也是因为奶奶才呆在附近的。'　泥古的话让我想起了黄鳝和紫苏).[40]

This brief quote epitomises the idea of certain species always being found together and supposedly benefitting from it – a kind of naturally occurring companion species. Earlier in the story we have been told that 'zisu grow in places with eels (紫苏正是同黄鳝长在一处的)'. When we hear that the wolves are 'only there because of Grandma' and that their relationship reminds Chick of the one between zisu and eels, it suggests that this is more than two species enjoying the same environment, it is two species that need one another's company in order to thrive – companion species. Indeed, wolves and humans have such a long record of antagonism, companionship and domestication both historically and mythologically,[41] that legends, fairy tales and fictions of wolf-human encounters abound. In a contemporary Chinese language context, the role of wolves in the ecological imaginary became a source of heated debate after Jiang Rong's (姜戎) *Wolf Totem* (狼图腾) came out in 2004. The novel, which casts Mongols as a strong, 'wolf-like'

40 Can Xue, '鸡仔的心愿'. All quotes from this short story are in my translation of the unpaginated, online publication.

41 See Pierotti and Fogg, *The First Domestication*.

and environmentally conscious people that the 'sheep-like' and domesticated Han-Chinese should learn from, became hugely popular and influential, but was also heavily criticised for the above racialised dichotomy, its fascist tendencies and for simply inventing the legends and practices it portrayed.[42] Despite such criticisms, the novel and its film version have succeeded in coding wolves as symbols of ecological awareness in the popular imaginary.[43]

Throughout the story, Nigu come to represent an intimate and intuitive connection to nature that allows him to sense what his companion species are doing at the other end of the forest:

> He simply answered that since wolves were very warm-hearted animals, he could sense their leaving through changes in the flow of qi/air. His words made me so envious – how nice it would be if I could master this skill of his! But as I didn't understand anything and could only let him drag me dizzy and faint in our forwards scuttle – how could I pay proper attention to the qi/air flow. 他就回答说，狼是热情的动物，他能从气流的变化上感觉到它们要离开。他的话让我特别羡慕他——我要是能掌握他这种本事该有多好！可是我什么都不懂，只能被他拖着昏头昏脑地往前窜，哪里还顾得上去观察气流.

Through his mastery of air currents (气流), Nigu is attuned to the natural environment in a way that Chick is not. The character 气 (qi) that is used, means both air and life energy and so it is up to the reader to interpret Nigu's skill as an outcome of either environmental immersion or spiritual intonement, or a combination of the two.

Despite its somewhat naïve presentation of an undefined but benevolent realm of nature that human civilisation has moved away from, the short story presents the reader with an interesting take on cross-species translation and communication. As Marder points out, 'The assumption that to have a language is to be able to speak is both erroneous and unethical'.[44] The story's description of Nigu's extended sensory awareness, a form of communication that goes beyond the visual and the linguistic, seems characteristic of several of the plant narratives studied here. Just as Nigu is able to communicate with the wolves without language but via the wind, so Chick discovers a sensory connection with the zisu and decides to adopt it as his companion plant:

42 Visser, *Questioning Borders*, p. 25.

43 See Hong, 'Further questions about the ecological themes of wolf totem'.

44 Marder, 'To hear plants speak', p. 113.

> There are many kinds of vegetables in Mama Yuan's vegetable garden, but my favourite among them is the fragrant zisu. Zisu are modest plants, you don't have to give them any special care, as long as it rains a little, they will grow and spread their unusual scent which leads to wild dreams and flights of fancy. (圆妈妈的菜园里的菜品种很多，其中我最喜欢的是香菜紫苏。紫苏很贱，用不着特殊照顾它们，下点雨就长开了，散发着特殊的、让人想入非非的异香).

In a subtle metafictional gesture, the imagination-enhancing properties of zisu are evoked, suggesting that it is partly responsible for the fiction we are reading. The other, non-human companion species of the zisu – the eel – also provides interesting connotations: as an amphibian, it is able to travel between the realms of water and dry land, just as the zisu allows Chick to move from reality and into the world of 'dreams and flights of fancy.'

In companion planting terms, consuming zisu is beneficial to the human body (as a flavouring and medicinal herb) and, in return, the humans take care of the plant and provide it with a protected and well-watered growing space in the vegetable garden. Later in the story, it is the scent of zisu that immediately revives and comforts Chick when he is lost in the woods:

> then I saw an enormous patch of zisu. I bent down, grabbed a handful of leaves, and held them to my nose. Ah, what an intoxicating fragrance! I regained my strength and my mind filled with thoughts of eel soup. (于是我看见了大片大片的紫苏。我弯下腰抓了一把叶子，放到鼻子前。啊，真是醉人的香气！我恢复了元气，满脑海里都是黄鳝汤).

The zisu communicates homeliness: the promise of a full belly and a safe place. Unlike the other plants that grow in the forest and signify wilderness for Chick, the smell of zisu conjures the home they share.

The ecological lessons that Chick has learned from Nigu and Mama Yuan's relationship with the wolves are embodied by the zisu and communicated through its scent:

> Afterwards I would often cry out in my sleep: 'Zisu! Zisu….' and be awoken by my own noise. I would touch the zisu and bring the crushed leaves to my nose for a good sniff. Such an intoxicating scent! 我后来常常在梦里喊着：' 紫苏！紫苏……' 然后我就被自己吵醒了。我摸到了紫苏，将叶子揉碎放在鼻子前用力嗅。多么醉人的香气！.

The smell of the zisu becomes a synecdoche for the interspecies connections exemplified in the story, as well as their importance for

the wellbeing of humans. For Chick, it is his companion plant, the zisu, that ensures he remains in some way part of a greater ecology and as '[p]lants communicate above ground through volatile organic chemicals',[45] it is the scent of the plant rather than its name that conveys this connection. Although it remains a story written from a human perspective where 'across the spectrum of symbolic transcriptions and translations, the literal plant, the plant itself, remains untranslatable',[46] a companion plant reading of Can Xue's narrative denaturalises human languages by means of poly-bionymic confusion. Its cross-sensory translation from the biochemical to the textual opens up a space for thinking creatively about our engagement with the vegetal world through and beyond translation.

PRICKLY POSTHUMAN SEX

Smelling a zisu leaf may inspire creativity but, in the case of flowers, as Joela Jacobs reminds us, it is always also a sexual encounter.[47] The sexual aspect of angiosperms has led to widespread associations between flowering plants and romantic and erotic love in both poetry and science.[48] Of particular interest here, is the literary use of plant reproduction to explore queer sexualities, since, as Jacobs notes, 'the mix of asexual and sexual reproduction in plants recasts human sexuality as a range of options'.[49] In her short story 'Seedlings' (苗, Spirer 2018), Audrey R. Hollis takes advantage of the ingrained association between flowers and (queer) sexualities to explore what a more plant-like romantic relationship might entail both physically and emotionally. Pamela, the story's protagonist, is unhappy in her relationship and decides to take drastic measures:

> Pamela swallowed a cactus and grew spines. They shot up through her pores, inches long and thick and stiff … She enjoyed it, that first day, feeling them push up through her skin. Every time her skin was shoved upward and held taut,

45 Hall, *Plants as Persons*, pp. 153–54.
46 Marder, 'To hear plants speak', p. 109.
47 Jacobs, 'These lusting, incestuous, perverse creatures', p. 602.
48 Kranz, 'The language of flowers in popular culture and botany', pp. 204–05.
49 Jacobs, 'These lusting, incestuous, perverse creatures', p. 613.

> every time it stretched, and broke, the pinpoint head of a new spine sticking through, she knew she had made the right choice.[50]

By eating a cactus, Pamela herself becomes more cactus-like with all the challenges and promises her new body carries.

Pamela's body becomes the soil for a radical cactus-human companion planting. Though published as speculative fiction, this idea of a shared body is more apt than strange. As Gilbert et al. remind us, the branch of life we belong to has from the first been the result of interspecies mingling as 'eukaryotic cells are themselves the result of several symbiosis' so that 'what counts as "self" is dynamic and context-dependent'.[51] As such, Pamela's posthuman cross-species body is just a more explicit and recognisable visualisation of the kind of fundamental comingling of species that is part of our evolutionary history and still takes place inside the bodies that we share with trillions of other microorganisms.[52]

At first, the transformation seems promising to Pamela as it protects her from unwanted intrusions from the outside world: 'She loved, so deeply, being an untouchable thing'. Although being untouchable brings its own challenges in terms of intimacy, it also forces Pamela and her girlfriend Lydia to be more creative and attentive during love-making. As visual arts scholars Robin A. McDonald and Dan Vena have found, exploring human sexuality through vegetal being can help us focus on 'expanding given possibilities of what constitutes physical or erotic pleasures' rather than 'streamlining more amorphous kinds of desire into the penile-vaginal sex act served to make "sex" align with capitalist values not only of productivity, but also of reproductivity'.[53] This is not only a question of confronting heterosexual norms, it also forces the couple to reevaluate and reinvent their own sexual habits: 'The sex was certainly more creative. Lydia would crack her open now, stroke the moist, water-bearing seams that made up her insides, mov-

50 Hollis, 'Seedlings'. All quotes from this short story are from the unpaginated, online publication.

51 Gilbert, Sapp and Tauber, 'A symbiotic view of life', p. 333.

52 Results from the Human Microbiome Project suggest that hundreds of different kinds of species live in and on our bodies, including bacteria, archaea, fungi, protozoans, and viruses, and that the cells of the microbiota vastly outnumber human cells. (Rogers, 'Human microbiome').

53 McDonald and Vena, 'Monstrous relationalities', p. 205.

ing with exquisite care. Pamela would wear gloves'. This is sex without a manual, where gendered expectations are put aside, and interaction is determined not by the cultural coding of sexual organs but by Pamela's thorns that complicate as well as promote intimacy with the new need to be especially considerate and careful. It also highlights the duality of pain and pleasure in sexual intercourse, as Lydia needs to navigate Pamela's prickly outside to caress her softer insides.

The diverse forms of plant sexuality lead to the story's second theme, which is alternative modes of reproduction and Pamela's desire to persuade Lydia to make the same vegetal change she has and for them to have a child. Lydia is unwilling, but thanks to her new cactus form, Pamela is able to proceed without her and produce small 'lumps' on her own. These are clones of herself –a capacity for vegetal and asexual reproduction common with succulents – and stand in contrast to the seedlings of the title that are result of sexual fertilisation (although many plants can self-pollinate, thus complicating the binary between intersexual and asexual reproduction with a third autosexual option). Pamela's companion plant not only helps her to explore new sexual possibilities but to create new life as well:

> She studied it, becoming more certain. It lay completely still in the palm of her hand, tiny and prickly and stubbornly alive. Hard and round and genderless, with tiny spines that looked as soft as cuticles, ready to sprout and grow. Pamela set it on the ground by the foot of the bench and walked away from it, feeling freed.

The tiny cactus-human clone intensifies some of the existential ambiguity involved in all acts of reproduction – it is both her and not her, neither the original nor a copy. This is underlined when Pamela can't decide whether her 'lump' is a part of her body that has been discarded or a growth of something new: "'I'm shedding," Pamela said. "Or budding"'.

The cactus child can be seen as a *translation* of Pamela, it could not have existed without her, yet here it is, continuing to live independent of her. In their work on queering translation, scholars continue to challenge the notion of authenticity in the source text and argue that '[o]n a larger theoretical level, notions of translation as a performative practise, as an imitation with at best tenuous links to the idea of an original, as an indefinite deferral of meaning, but also as a site of othering,

hegemony and subalterity, mark it out as always already queer'.[54] Like the little cactus, the process of translation can be seen as 'prickly and stubbornly alive', full of both limitations and possibilities beyond habitual conformity, making it '[h]ard and round and genderless … ready to sprout and grow' beyond the control of the source text or the author. Imagining a translated text as a child or cactus clone also highlights the inherent hybridity of the source, underlining how it is itself a product, a child, of other, older texts and thoughts and languages that comprise the microbiome of culture.

Pamela's experiments with alternative sexualities and modes of reproduction do not go uncensored, however. It turns out that society has deemed it illicit: 'Lydia stroked one with the very tip of her finger, a movement so gentle it made Pamela feel squishy for the first time in weeks. "It's illegal, isn't it? To make more cacti?"'. Vegetal reproduction continues to be viewed as a danger, in the ways that made classical plant horror so potent as it was 'often characterized by radical overgrowth, hyper-reproduction and/or a disturbing craving to ensnare and consume, monstrous plants disrupt already uneasy hierarchies of subjecthood by rearing their petals, tendrils, or leafy heads in unexpected forms and places'.[55] Not only is Pamela's new body subject to laws that prohibit her from multiplying, her drought-tolerant corpus grows increasingly estranged from the moistness of humanity: 'Pamela blinked, watching Lydia's fingers curl around her fork. In the light, her skin looked almost soggy with the surfeit of moisture. She'd been seeing it more and more around the city, this impossible, obscene excess'. As Dawn Keetley has argued, it is often their capacity for excessive growth that make fictional monster plants horrifying, not least because we recognise ourselves in it.[56] Indeed if any one species stands for overproduction and invasive population growth, it must be humanity, and the narrator's complaint that human cities suffer from an 'obscene excess' of moisture speaks to this. Where water is the great *connector* in Ahl's 'Naboplanter' – the hydrocommons that plants, humans and other Earthlings share – in 'Seedlings' water is what sets Pamela apart: 'She couldn't take more than a sip or two of water at a time anymore – anything more made

54 Epstein and Gillett. 'Introduction', p. 1.

55 McDonald and Vena, 'Monstrous relationalities', p. 204.

56 Keetley, 'Six theses on plant horror', pp. 16-19.

her feel like she was drowning'. Pamela is no longer able to function in the social and ecological sphere she used to inhabit. She feels that the world, including her girlfriend, is becoming wetter at the same time as she becomes less and less moisture tolerant.

Certain sections of 'Seedlings' can be read as allegories of artificial insemination surrounded by societal regulations and expectations as well as of the radical bodily changes that pregnancy involves. Indeed, Pamela's 'cactification' reads like a medical process:

> It wasn't difficult to get the permit, if you were of age and could pass a psychology test. The latter was made easier by a cottage industry of notaries, lawyers and quasi-medical professionals. Sign away your life in waivers and visit one of the small stores – which were mandated to be a certain distance from the schools, just in case – full of various cactus clippings from lab-grown plants.

But, like a growing plant, the story exceeds and evolves beyond the confines of allegory to interrogate human relationships, existential loneliness and social expectations of bodies in general. Through experiments with her new plant-body Pamela grows apart from her world as well as her partner, who ends up leaving her: 'Pamela let her mind wander, not thinking of the child she'd wanted, with dark eyes and ferocious spines, not thinking of the wife she'd wanted, strong and prickly, but instead thinking of the lumps on her back, the spaces inside of her'. Pamela and Lydia's visions for their future diverge more and more, until they end up as two different species in need of two different habitats, one dry, one moist. Rather than raising a child together, half soft human, half spiny cactus, Pamela is left with just her own 'lumps'.

Pamela's prickly companion plant in 'Seedlings' provides her with protection from the world, it offers creative sexualities and alternative means of reproduction. Although these experiments come at the price of losing Lydia, from the reader's extradiegetic perspective, the companion planting of cactus and human together in one protagonist affords a non-binary model for thinking about (textual) authenticity and the (more than human) individual. By embracing the materiality, and confronting the symbolism, of literary plants, Hollis shows that the vegetal characters can bring both radical alterity *and* intimate association to the ecosystem of contemporary literature.

COMPANION PLANT READING

In her posthuman take on anthropology, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing reiterates anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's emphasis that

> [c]omparisons risk erecting artificial boundaries and suggest internal homogeneity in order to facilitate comparison with other 'units'. Even outside explicit comparisons, the tools we use are comparative and so rather than shy away from comparisons, we should engage in a form of analysis that 'exposes the specificity of one's tools as well as one's objects'.[57]

By companion planting texts in different languages including nonverbal plant communication, translation is exposed as a main tool in the comparative endeavour and one that accentuates the diversity of possible perspectives both within and across units of comparison. Just as the stories translate between plant being and human languages, my translations between Chinese, Danish and English underline the diversity of experiences that lives, not only between languages, but within every single language as we translate our individual thoughts, feelings and perceptions into words that can be shared.

In a scaled down version of Jacobs' phytopoetics, where the vegetal world shapes human cultures, the literary plant characters shape human narratives in ways that require an extended sensory understanding of communication that includes touch and smell as well as sight and sound. Such multisensory forms of communication necessitate a more bodily and time-consuming form of translation whereby human narrators immerse themselves in their companion plant's environment and give voice to the plant protagonists through their own corporeal experiences living with and learning from plants.

In Ahl's 'Naboplanter', the vines use a tactile form of communication to train the human narrator to care for them in ways that will benefit both companion species. Through a focus on shared circuits of water, air and solar energy, vines and humans are translated into analogous components in a larger ecological commons. Adding a metafictional dimension, Can Xue's short story suggests that it owes its existence to the inspirational qualities of the zisu's intoxicating fragrance. It could be read as the human narrator's translation of that scent into narrative

57 Tsing, 'Strathern beyond the human', p. 227.

form, coupled with the ecological and creative insights it communicates to him. After translating from touch and smell in the other texts, Hollis provides a more holistic perspective where the human protagonist translates her entire body into the material language of plants so as to be able to reproduce and 'say what she is'. Here, it is the human body itself that is viewed as an ecosystem in which several species are planted together.

By reading with plants and humans as literary companions, a transversal perspective arises from human narrators that are either trained, inspired, or even transformed by, plant protagonists. Anthropocentrism is not eliminated but recast in a context where it represents just one perspective among many, translated into one human language among many. Read together, these three stories serve to remind us of the linguistic and corporeal situatedness of their human authors and readers, as well as the plants that trained and inspired them. But they also emphasise that their very position is the product of continued co-evolution and cross-species communication.

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