

Plant Poetics & Beyond: Co-Dependencies & Becoming: The Languages of Personhood

written by Janice Lee | September 17, 2019



[\[Plant Poetics and Beyond\]](#)

To begin, I invite you to close your eyes. Be seated in a comfortable position. First, take a deep inhale in. Exhale with a loud sigh and allow your shoulders to sink into the floor. Put one hand on your thigh, and leave your other hand at your side. Sense your hand on your thigh. Feel into the hand-ness of your hand. What does it feel like from the hand? Sense your thigh from the perspective of the hand, as your hand. / Now, sense your hand from your thigh. Sense your hand as your thigh. What does this feel like? How is this different from sensing as your hand? How does your thigh feel the pressure of your hand? / Now, sense the space in between your hand and your thigh. What does this feel like? (If you are having trouble with this, slightly lift your hand up – just slightly, and see if you can sense the energy in that space between.)

The Czech philosopher Erazim Kohák writes: How should we speak to trees, how should we treat the trees, other animals and each other so that all of us can live and live at peace?

In my own work and in my pedagogy, I think about how plants make it possible for us to consider other ways in which to narrate our trauma and our wounds, how we might be able to imagine ourselves outside of bodies and identities defined by the past. As a Korean-American, I think of trauma and its inheritance through the concept of *han*, which Suh Nam-dong describes as “a feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong—all these combined.” I think about the feeling of a mausoleum, the feeling of becoming a

mausoleum, the skin of one's body thickening and hardening into concrete walls – this as a mechanism to keep others out in order to survive and to keep ourselves from being vulnerable, an attempt at safeguarding against permeability. I think about the unbalanced human belief in a singular self while plants understand cycles of growing and dying, inside the same body, inside multiple bodies, the reciprocity of bodies in the shimmering, undulating sea, so that of course, the shuttered human idea of “identity” becomes impossible. I think too of the bio-precarious domain, how does the constant trauma of the body, the constant risk of harm essentially and efficiently revise the language with which we identify ourselves.

When I was a little girl, my mother taught me the the Korean concept of *nunchi* (눈치). When I was older, I came across more official definitions that defined *nunchi* (a combination of the Korean words for “eye” and “measure/psychic energy”) as an unspoken social intuition, an awareness of the feelings of those around you, or the ability to sense another person's mood. It is about survival, my mother would repeat to me. *That friend of yours, 눈치 없.* (*She doesn't have nunchi.*) I inherited a sense of this concept and its importance through the way my mother would use it to describe other people and in the ways she forced me to pay attention to invisible gestures, details, resonances, feelings. Essentially, she taught me to *feel* at a distance.

This, of course, is the definition of *telepathy*. Coined by Frederick W.H. Myers in 1882, telepathy essentially means “feeling at a distance.”

From plants, we might learn to better feel at a distance, to invoke change from within, and to heal with a focus inwards rather than outwards. Plants are sessile beings, meaning they aren't mobile. They are rooted in place, so that any encounter with an other, is never just a simple question of waiting or coincidence. Though no physical movement or action is possible, a plant's encounter with an other is made possible through a metamorphoses of the self. That is, it is only by internal transformation that the immobile plant can encounter the world. It's important to remember that to truly encounter the world and to perceive it means to be touched and penetrated by it to the point of being changed and modified by it.

Plants, though, are not simply *of* the world, passively shaped by external forces. They produce the space in which they live rather than being forced to adapt to it.

In thinking about plants, we think about the climate. But as Emanuele Coccia writes in *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, “The climate is not the collection of the gases that envelop the terrestrial globe. It is the essence of cosmic fluidity, the deepest face of our world, the one that reveals it as the infinite mixture of all things, present, past, and future. The climate is the name and the metaphysical structure of mixture. In order for a climate to exist, all the elements within a given space must be at once mixed and identifiable—united not through substance, form, or contiguity but through the same ‘atmosphere.’ ... At the climatic level, everything that is and has been constitutes a world. Climate is the being of cosmic unity.”

So for plants, life is one of immersion. It is important to remember that the verb “to be” could be thought of “to *make world*,” that we cannot separate ourselves from the matter of the rest of the world. “Every living being constructs itself starting from the same matter that makes up the mountains and the clouds.” That is, though it is true that we are water and stardust, we are also airplane fuel, dog shit, the plastic trash building up in the ocean, pollen, flattened bugs on the car windshield, a dead baby orca on its mother’s back.

We might consider the leaf, the paradigmatic form of openness: it absorbs from the atmosphere around it and is permeable, constantly open to influence by the world without being overwhelmed or destroyed by it. For plants, to exist, to be in the world, means to *make world*, every action within is also an action without and without passivity, plants exercise their will on the world. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about the language of animacy, that is, in the ways we might rethink our language in order that it expresses life, and that of other living beings, that instead of using language to pass judgment and create classification ie. in English, A tree is an oak, a pine, a beech – we might also enact the process of growing, becoming, that we might be able to say, “The tree trees” (the tree is becoming a tree), or “the cloud clouds.” The trees not only are but also create a world, they *world* (in the verbal, active sense of the world). In Ojibwe, (a language closely related to Potawatomi), *Puhpowee* is the word for “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight.”

In this dynamic, the world is not simply a geographical place, it is “a state of immersion of each thing in all other things...In order for immersion to be possible, *everything needs to be in everything.*” (Coccia) So that the inhalation that is my first breath in the morning is also the dragon carrot I harvested and ate for dinner last night is also the energy of the summer solstice and of the entire cosmos is this sentence I write for this panel is the profound love I have for my aging dog Benny is his peaceful snoring in the middle of the night is his exhalation.

In the breath, there is the acknowledgement that we are all a part of the same sphere of life, not the division of natural and human or plant and animal, but that the breath itself can decategorize the arbitrary categories of living.

Emanuele Coccia writes, “Everything in the realm of the living is the articulation of breath: from perception to digestion, from thought to pleasure, from speech to locomotion. Everything is a repetition, intensification, and variation of what takes place in breath.” What we inhabit isn’t simply the Earth, the ground or a planetary body, but all of the air around us and the atmosphere, “atmosphere as the vital breath that animates the Earth in its totality.”

Breath itself, like poetry, is the art of mixture.

Every act of knowledge is an act of atmosphere, and because everything is in everything, “To inhale is to allow the world to come into us—the world is in us—and to exhale is to project ourselves into the world that we are... To

breathe is to let oneself be penetrated by the world in order to make, from the world, something that is *also* made from our breath." Plants that the world as a space of immersion means that there are no real or stable borders. The world is a space that can not be reduced to my house or your house, to property, to land, to what is owned, or to what can only be defined in immediate and linear terms.

Thursday afternoon Melissa K. Nelson talked about the imbalance of fire externally because of the imbalance of fire internally within ourselves. I think about how so much of my own pain begins in the gut, has as being defined as a pain that emanates from the bowels. But in many ways of self-healing, meditation, exercises in breathing, we focus on this very center of ourselves, the focal point of breath, the *kath* point in Sufism, in Chinese medicine the *dantien*. In thinking about how breath unites us, I am pulled to move away from humancentric, capitalist notions of an individual self, but to think instead of Nelson's "radical kinship," about relationality, openness, permeability, atmosphere.

Sitting in my garden, I try to redirect the intensity of my emotions, and in an attempt to reach outwards like the creeping tendrils of the pea plant, I squat by the plants each morning, time passing on the surface of the soil and my fingers somehow in tune with *that* time rather than my own, I feel somehow grounded in the ground beneath me, somehow less alone, because as I breathe out there among the plants, we are breathing together, and because the growth of the plants signal a constant becoming, it reminds me simply of the state of being, that influence happens in both directions, or of the kind of *attunement* that Vincianne Despret describes in her work.

Here, a world of relation, of breath, of atmosphere. In this world, the in-between liminal states of day and night, land and water, and life and death find concreteness in the pale colors of the sky. These are certainties rooted in transition, and the creatures here know to pay attention. "Think lightly of yourself, and deeply of the world," they repeat. Plants, as beings that inhabit two different worlds simultaneously, immediately, naturally. Everywhere, all of the plants and animals breathe together in an intimate cycle that is shared and just like language, can only exist *because* it is shared, because of the together. Today the relational qualities of air are the relational qualities of words, and you may learn more from paying attention to what lies beneath your feet than what composes the sky above you.

The core of it all is the breath, the long and sustained breath that connects us all together.

I'd like to end with a final meditation. Once more, I invite you to close your eyes: Imagine yourself as a body of water, imagine yourself, in fact, as an ocean. Imagine yourself as a vast and endless body, imagine what it feels like to exist as an ocean, to be an ocean, to feel as an ocean. What do you feel? How do you feel? How does it feel to expand and flow outwards? / Now, imagine yourself as a single wave. Imagine washing upon the shore and then slowly receding back into the larger body of water. What does this movement feel like? How do you feel in relation to the entire ocean? / Now, imagine

yourself as a large and vast forest. How far does your body reach? How do you feel as an embodied network of many trees and plants and animals and dirt and air? / Now, imagine yourself as a single tree on the edge of that forest. How do you feel differently? How do you see yourself in relation to the rest of the forest? How do you see yourself in relation to the rest of the world?

– June 29, 2019