

Chapter 14

Multispecies Motherhood

Connecting with Plants through Processes of Procreation

Mariko Oyama Thomas

When I was little, perhaps six or seven, the backyard of my otherwise unspectacular suburban dwelling presented a fertile, jubilant landscape of possibility for communication and connection. At that time, I lived in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and can easily recall the pungent emission of fragrance from the wet soil where I pressed my palms in the pine duff, the underbellies of the undulating slugs somehow slick and sticky at the same time, and the faint whisper of iris blossoms opening their feathery layers to the rare spring streams of sunlight. Like many very young people, I was quite positive that most of the plants around me were somehow at least dimly aware of my presence, and at least somewhat cognizant of how life worked, as well as busy with their own narrative arcs of love, goals, aging, eating, love-making, and kin-making. Simultaneously, I was already intrinsically aware of how I shouldn't speak about my animate plants and their families in public and perceptive of the kind of social humiliation that could be easily doled out by my seven-year-old peers or second grade teacher if I vocalized this tiny intimate truth.

On my own time, I indulged in the dreamy possibilities of all living things participating in complex multilayered lives. I conceptualized flowers as fairy creatures, and I felt constantly observed by their purple petaled bodies. They leaned on each other in such a way that I assumed they were family members, baby blossoms to a velvety strong mother bloom, and I was generally torn between the desire to capture their bodies and combine them with mine by plucking them or eating them, and the fear that they would no longer be there to commune with if I did, or that I might be ripping a mother from a child, a friend from a friend.

I am by no means an anomaly of a childhood case with this anecdote, and do not consider myself any more perceptive of the more-than-human¹ world than any other child raised in the Western/ized world, even in these anthropocentric times. I share this story (rather anthropomorphic though it might be) as an example of how the possibility of relationship with and between more-than-humans seems more tangible in those years that are protected from the glare of dominant Western/ized worldviews. These ways of being that have brought Earth to its current point of precarity tend to privilege a kind of Cartesian rationalism that leaves little room for plant animacy (Hall 2011), or the possibility that as the plant queendom² comprises the majority of biomass on the planet (Bar-On, Phillips, and Milo 2018), and a much longer history of existence than the animal queendom let alone the human species (Morris et al. 2018), plants might know a thing or two about living, family, and procreation.

The goal of this chapter is to explore embodied and material connections with plant-life through the lens of my experience of early motherhood. It is also to ruminate on the complicated relationships between motherhood, childhood, and environmentalism in the Anthropocene and, through autoethnographic prose and poetry, bring performative moments of these to light. This chapter begins with a short summary of some of the tensions between motherhood and environmentalism, moves to some concepts that could help work through those tensions, and closes with a range of short performative writings that intimately cavort with the similarities between plant and human bodies, and the magic times and cyclic similarities of motherhood and childhood. As this is but one telling in one historical moment, I hope to provide examples of a way to find commonality between human bodies and those otherworldly green beings who make our lives possible.

MYTHIC CHILDHOODS

For many humans, childhood offers an era to live fully and almost mythically in the magic of place and more-than-humans (Chawla 2002), making it a more feasible time to consider sentience in plants. Childhood also allows space for children to find and make kin with forms and beings that do not resemble their own bodies. Children will often fail to discriminate between differently bodied beings and regard a teddy bear, a Barbie doll, a pet guinea pig, and themselves as able to equally participate in a raucous tea party. Young humans spend large swaths of time looking for points of relation—asking, “do ducks have belly buttons?” Or telling others assuredly “that rose looks tired and is sleeping on a leaf pillow.”

Biological accuracy aside (as we may never truly know that a rose conceptualizes a leaf the way humans consider down-stuffed pillows) the motivation to constantly connect to other beings is often blindingly present the closer to birth one is. Dominant ontologies about “nature”³ have yet to fully infiltrate the daily imaginations of children of young ages (Herrmann, Waxman, and Medin 2010), and perhaps the rather low mastery of verbal and written speech present in youth leaves room for other possibilities and potential ways to connect.⁴ Either way, early childhood exists as a space to communicate and thereby commune with trees, flowers, nonhuman animals, toy horses, and whatever is thought to exist in the dark corner underneath the bed. Whether we realized it or not at the time, this instinctual desire to comprehend the world as sensual (Abram 2012), and writhing with indelibly alive beings, is perhaps a reflection of how hugely possible ecocentric understandings of the universe are, even in adulthood, and even in Western/ized cultures.

However, while this ecocentricity is observed in youth, it is often difficult to avoid the amnesia that can occur when we learn to distinguish, categorize, compartmentalize, judge, and discriminate between like-us and not-like-us. This learned separation between human and more-than-human is rooted in industrialized and colonized societies’ need to propagate an unsustainable capitalist model that relies on subjugation of more-than-humans (Naess, 2006). This subjugation is woven insidiously into many parts of the fabric of Western/ized cultures. For example, as a communication scholar, it is difficult for me to ignore how most elementary words of the English language can construct boundaries between human and more-than-human. This can work to discount innate sensual knowledge of the more-than-human world, and instead promote it as something less fantastical and more disconnected. The goals of othering, and reflections of dominant anthropocentricity are hard to avoid—woven into every kind of popular culture (Sturgeon 2009), and even into children’s books (Waxman et al. 2014). For example, in 2008, the Oxford children’s dictionary was slated to let go of words like “catkin,” “cauliflower,” and “clover,” and instead replace them with words like “broadband” and “cut-and-paste,” prompting a legion of authors to come to the defense of those words that were no longer considered important for a child’s vocabulary (Flood 2015). Nouns aside, even the use of pronouns instructs perceived separation or closeness, as choosing what may be a they/he/she versus calling a living being an “it” or “thing” has innumerable consequences toward extensions of personhood. As Kimmerer (2013) writes, young people often extend intention, compassion, and personhood to plant and animal beings until they are retrained not to, often by the adults in their lives, those persons who have lost or been coerced out of their ability to see and speak about the innate liveness of the world around them.

MOTHERHOOD REVISITED

While this focus on childhood ecocentricity is important, it is unfair to frame childhood as the only time when ecocentric worldviews can be formed, and unrealistic for current environmental goals to theorize as if there were only one time period in which innate ecocentricity is possible. While perspective shifts are (and must be) possible at any time in life, I am finding that new motherhood is a ripe potential space to re-order anthropocentric worldviews and tune-in to the more-than-human world. Through shared processes and the overall telos of making babies⁵ that much of this planet shares, many points of connection emerge, despite the diverse range of ways plants, animals, fungi, and so on do parenthood or do body. For many, motherhood is a liminal space where identity and perspective are challenged, lost, or reinforced (Laney et al. 2015). Careers, senses of self, and relationships with other humans are often radically altered, as is environmental identity⁶ or the ways in which people perceive, act, and attach to environment. This makes motherhood a potentially fruitful time to reassess, reflect, and rework ideas or roadblocks in perception of the more-than-human world.

For the course of this chapter, I speak through my own embodied experience of recently experienced motherhood and my sensations of the utter materiality of growing another carbon-based life-form in my womb. By writing from this space, I direly hope not to negate the expansive experiences of the concepts of motherhood, parenthood, and relation-making that are so crucial in these anthropogenic times. For example, I have great affinity toward the notion of “kin-making” and believe this to be a pivotal way of relating. Haraway (2016) writes, “kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenic family troubles important matters” (2). I happen to have arrived at the perspective that prompted this chapter by the process of “godkin,” however, these experiences allowed me ways to create with and bond to oddkin. There are many ways of birthing/making/creating/merging kin, out of many experiences of doing body. My entry point to kin-making just happened to be biogenetic. In the wake of anthropogenic ecological crisis and deep uncertainty and fear about the power and fallibilities of bodies amid a zoonotic pandemic and the violent oppression of not only our more-than-human kin but also our human kin, re-remembering the common bond of materiality and earthly bodies we share with so many more-than-human beings is crucial to continuing to exist together on the planet, no matter how might one engage in the concept of kin in their lives.

MAKING SENSE OF MOTHERHOOD

Though I am embarrassed to admit it, it wasn't until I found myself unexpectedly pregnant toward the end of my doctorate that I began to remember the personhood(s) of plants and my love of them as a child. This stumble into pregnancy and motherhood had unexpected consequences on my conceptualization of the world, in that I had never experienced anything that resided so relentlessly in the physical world and my material body. I could throw a full gamut of intellectual jargon, Hegelian philosophy, and critiques of media and rhetoric to frame my slowly swelling belly but at its root, the seemingly radical reality of my body existing in this Earthly realm and following an age-old trial and error filled evolutionary pattern to make carbon that makes carbon, overwhelmed the rest of my ideas. I had spent years living in a world of pure rhetoric, relying on words, and disconnected "rationality" and "logic," and I now was forced to think of myself as rooted in the soil and as simply a body in a world of bodies, with the weight of what surely resembled a small sea creature pressing into my pelvis.

As an environmental scholar, the pregnancy was intellectually complicated and confusing. Narratives that tie motherhood(s) and women in all multitudes to environmentalism can consist of tangled, painfully colonized, patriarchal motives bound up in diverse moral codes. Not only the experiences of having a female body but also the experiences of motherhood come fraught with discordant environmental discourse. As many ecofeminist scholars have scrupulously detailed; women, female bodies, and the project of motherhood have been negatively associated with "nature" for generations of humanity (Griffin 2015; Merchant 1990; Plumwood 1986; 2002). One of the philosophical moments this can be traced back to is an unfortunate proposition by Aristotle that relegated eggs in ovaries as passive and material, and female spirit as "irrational" and therefore closer to a wild and illogical "nature" that men had supposedly overcome (Merchant 1990). Historically, women were argued to live in a material realm that made them more like nonanimals than their male counterparts, who were argued to have transcended "nature" (Griffin 2015; Merchant 1990). The legacy of these ideas makes women's connections to birth, domesticity and the more-than-human entirely complicated for those working to subvert old oppressions, yet still wishing to engage in ecofeminist conversations and honoring the astounding possibilities of having a woman⁷ body.

Currently, women, and especially mothers, continue to be positioned as beings of the domestic (i.e., material) realm, and mainstream society still has little political or economic respect for the day-to-day experiences of dealing with the material, tangible, and touchable world of domestic work and child-rearing. This has resulted in feminist movements that often eschew

domesticity to participate in movements away from the material aspects of being animal bodied beings in contact with the more-than-human world and materiality (Alaimo 2008). However, the act of separating women from the material happenings and sheer existences of their bodies also poses challenges, in that by trying to liberate women from the oppressive confines of being assumed as growers, birthers, and tenders, women are then separated from the material and physical aspects that they may choose to exercise in being born female-bodied. This includes a separation from their Earthly existences and potential connections that may ground them in kinship with the more-than-human world (Alaimo 2008; 2010). Though many feminists have fought so diligently to allow women the choice of whether they wish to use their physical bodies for procreation or domesticity, the resulting “bracketing [of] the biological body” brings severe separations, and as Alaimo (2008) writes, works to sever “its evolutionary, historical, and ongoing interconnections with the material world, [which] may not be ethically, politically, or theoretically desirable” (238).

ENVIRONMENTAL MOTHERHOOD

Mothers in Western/ized settings are not only faced with the conundrums of how to relate their bodies to the more-than-human, or ignore being grouped into past subjugations of “nature,” but also the current cultural pressures of deciding whether or not to procreate and how to keep an “environmental” household. Some environmental scholars argue that it is immoral to pose procreation as moral but overconsumption (or eco-gluttony) as immoral, the underlying message being that mainstream environmentalism is simply not enough to make the moves necessary to support the survival of other more-than-human species and spaces (Young 2001). Should women still decide to procreate under this pressure, they are still subjected to as much as 80 percent of domestic labor (Crittenden 2002)—a way of working that is often unrecognized and disrespected—are often judged on their “greenness” or level of sustainable practices in their homes, which requires the kind of time, help, and economic privilege that not many have. As Ray (2011) writes, “with all those diapers, and commutes to soccer games and new car seats, I might as well just start hacking away at glaciers myself” (83). Ray furthers her account of the pressures of “green motherhood” (or the way that environmentalism and motherhood are intertwined) by describing the troubling tension that women are often placed in where they are expected to uphold a motherly, nurturing, close-to-“nature” affect from being born female-bodied but are also somewhat persecuted by environmental movements as the ultimate sinners in their ability and/or choice to biologically reproduce, despite the fact that males are

generally needed to accomplish this. In her ruminations on motherhood and its ties to pro-environmental behavior, Ray asks for a re-evaluation as to why the labor-intensive project of being green is heaped on mothers who already run the risk of drowning in domestic labor. Here, the material labors of domestic life, women, environmentalism, and child-rearing are heaped into a messy tangle that makes it difficult to understand where and when to be what kind of woman, mother, and environmentalist.

NEW THEORIES TO APPLY WHEN THINKING ABOUT MOTHERHOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

One way to work with this tangle of motherhood, environmentalism, eco-feminism, and history could be to put a range of multidisciplinary theories in conversation with motherhood. Theories and writing surrounding the epistemological stances of animism, transcorporeality, and vital materialism offer less hierarchical ways to understand both human and more-than-human bodies, as they emphasize mutual permeability and togetherness on the planet, and often allow conversations to step momentarily away from humanist historic and current oppressions to focus more on a multispecies approach.

For example, animacy offers one potential entry point to thinking materially, as it focuses deeply on the relational aspects of co-existence (Bird-David 1999) and is less hierarchical in its positioning of different species. As described in Willerslev & Ulturgasheva (2012), animism is a horizontal relationship between people and spirits, where human-animals and more-than-human animals, life and afterlife, and death and birth, all exist in constant unison with little hierarchy. Often, animist cultures have close ties with more-than-human entities, such as the Eveny reindeer peoples' practice of pairing a reindeer with a child on birth. The reindeer guardian is charged with the task of protecting the child's "open soul" or their relatively accessible and newly transitioned spirit, and can do so by switching places with the child in the advent of malevolent spirits. In this, it is the mutual reversibility of child and reindeer that exemplifies the intersubjective relationships possible in cultures with a strong predilection toward animism. Because Eveny have no doubt that a child may embody a reindeer form and vice versa, they live in a world in which perceived boundaries between different species matter little, and personhood is possible for all.

However, theories of animacy work more for mythic landscapes and assembled and complete bodies⁸, as well as for understandings of ontological relatedness but is less effective describing the basic similarities of being bodies made of matter. Instead, animacy relies on the expectation that all things have personhood in their own right as opposed to anthropomorphic

personhood (Hall 2011). Animacy is a useful philosophical position from which to counteract the separations between objects and subjects, a division that has long placed both women and the more-than-human in the inactive/subject area. In this sense, it could be posed as a potential feminist concern and project. As identities that has been regularly subjugated over the ages and relegated as passive, female bodies and mother bodies have much at stake in the realizations of live-ness, liveliness, and questions of agency.

Alaimo's understanding of transcorporeality and Bennett's (2010) vital materiality should also be considered as useful lenses to put in conversation with motherhood, as they put slivers of animacy in the context of current Western thought and still acknowledge the relatibility and permeability of having a body on a shared planet. In dominant Western/ized thought, human-"nature" separation makes it entirely easy to ignore the potential personhoods, animacies, or agencies of the more-than-human world (Carbaugh, 1996; Haila 2000) and to avoid thinking in terms of relation. For example, considering what one has in common with a sunflower or a couch as opposed to never considering these things in the same stream of consciousness or looking for similarities between them.

In Bennett's (2010) *Vibrant Matter*, she urges readers to consider the "vital materiality" that runs through all things and bodies, and the enormous environmental and political consequences of human ignorance of this. She writes, "an active becoming, a creative not-quite-human force capable of producing the new buzzes within the history of the term nature. This vital materiality congeals into bodies, bodies that seek to preserve to prolong their run" (118). Bennett suggests that humans might do well to postpone questions of subjectivity and do away with the obsession of identifying what really distinguishes human from plants or anything else, and inquires as to how anthropomorphism might be a useful tool despite many scholars' aversion to it, as, "too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any trace of creative agency" (120).

Bennett's (2010) work helps argue against human exceptionalism, and also the concept that human bodies are special, independent, and unaffected by the world outside their skin, as she notes the ability of many seemingly inanimate items (such as food, for example) to affect the human form. Allewaert's (2013) work also touches on this, writing about colonies in the tropics and how the more-than-human world seeped into the colonizers "rationally" organized lives and bodies through mold, disease, and heat to effectively thin out the Western/ized attempts at remaining separate from their environment. Here, Bennett's (2010) work meshes well as the more-than-human and human meld in a messy permeability that belies the question of constant assembling and reassembling of animate matter to make bodies that are perhaps not our

own but rather running on the same frequencies that every other “thing” on the planet runs with.

In Allewaert’s (2013) and Bennett’s (2010) work, they describe topics such as the agency of mold, the liveness of disease, and the inseparability of human bodies with other bodies from the environment. Feminist scholar Alaimo’s (2008) work takes the concept of inseparability and suggests transcorporeality as a term and option for addressing the material aspects and interconnections of human and more-than-human relations, writing:

Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world, and at the same time acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies, allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous . . . realities in which “human” and “environment” can by no means be considered as separate. (239)

Transcorporeality, as she describes, is a way of imagining material bodies as constantly woven with the more-than-human world, an epistemological space that understands the utter inseparability and deep permeability of human and more-than-human corporeality. This is also an ethic, and way of being that can be applied to one’s gaze of the world, and a practice on how to interact with and understand the more-than-human. It is a concept that I rely heavily on in my reflections of motherhood, both throughout this chapter and in my life outside of writing.

MOTHERHOOD MAGIC

As I write this, my infant daughter sleeps downstairs, her mouth still smeared with mud from taste-testing several varieties of gravel earlier today and her hand clamped on a leaf she has refused to let go of. It will likely end up in her digestive tract—the interaction between this leaf and her body making the two wound up in mutual permeability and similar predilections for growth. I write this after a year of letting her grow in my belly and releasing her into autonomy in a wash of blood and afterbirth on my bedroom floor, after writing my dissertation that spearheaded much of the thinking found in this essay and defending it grossly pregnant, hot, tired, and unable to escape my body or hers.

The rest of this chapter is spent on several short explorations of multispecies motherhood and the similarities and overlaps I perceived in my experiences of birthing a daughter, with those of the living, birthing, plant world. Throughout this performative autoethnographic writing, I meditate on the “material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human

world” (Alaimo 2008, 238) and the animacy and shared materiality that human bodies have with plant bodies. I use performative writing to muse on the discordance of gender, environment, and motherhood and as a way to sidestep the contradictory directions of scholarship on these subjects and instead focus on the intimacy of my lived experience.

The prose and poems are points of connection, empathy, and relation with plants—a deeply ignored and misunderstood part of the planet (*see* Hall 2010; Wandersee and Schussler 1999) and an experiment in using the worldview-changing time period of early motherhood in a way that momentarily shuns the deep contestation about motherhood, women, and environment, found in Western/ized culture. As methodology to guide this generative exploration, I use autoethnographic prose based on Ellis’s (1999) discussion of heartfelt autoethnography and Pollock’s (1998) articulation of performative writing. As heartfelt autoethnography “includes researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits . . . and celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail” (669), and autoethnographers’ work in general works to constantly move from a wide understanding of current cultural forces to the intimate and vulnerable detail of how those forces are resisted, re-inscribed, or reflected in their own lives (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011), I found it particularly useful for delving into this subject matter. This undulation between outward and inward, public and private, feels apropos for writing about something as personal and universal as birth.

AQ: Please check if works is required in the text “in general works to constantly”.

To sculpt the autoethnographic prose and poems, I also relied heavily on Pollock’s (1998) understanding of performative writing, which as she describes it, “confounds the normative distinctions between critical and creative (hard and soft, true and false, masculine and feminine), allying itself with logics of possibility rather than validity” (81). Pollock continues, positing that performative writing “requires that the writer drop down to a place where words and the world intersect in active interpretations, where each pushes, cajoles, entrances the other into alternative formations, where words press into and are deeply impressed by the “sensuousness of their referents.””⁹ This is an especially fecund methodology when working with the sensuous world of relating to other beings and bodies, as performative writing (especially in an autoethnographic sense) allows space to sidestep rhetorical objectivity and instead delve into my own interpretations of the lived, physical, dynamic, and deeply personal, experiences.

Ranging from interconnections between human and plant birthing, to mourning and motherhood in this time that is so perilous for every species, these performative utterances are really an interrogation into the ways that motherhood have given me permission to come back into my material and animist existence, the aforementioned childhood existence, and through this realization of what it is to have a living birthing body and form a heart-aching

kinship with other mother bodies that make babies. They are also an experiment in trying to prolong the space that birthing and motherhood (despite rampant intellectual complications and contradictions) has allowed me back into, and a response to my hunch that like childhood, early motherhood is quite close to a sensual and wordless world. This writing is clumsy, and relies on imagination, phenomenological perception and interpretation, and anthropomorphism, which following the work of Bennett (2010) is still a useful starting point in perceiving connection and sameness despite scholarly wariness toward the term.

In the arrows and throes of recently birthing a human being, I have found myself able to reflect and remember much more about how I felt in my childhood ecocentricity than I used to. There are times when I can't sit still with the immense overflowing of empathy I feel toward the trees around me spreading their pollen, and the seedlings struggling to survive another unforgiving day of the New Mexico sun. Procreation, birth, and baby-rearing feel so material, so embodied, so old, and so Earthly, that I couldn't believe I had not deeply considered it as a cross-queendom connection before, causing me to sink deeply into rumination on the blindness toward interspecies connections often fostered by dominant society. True also are the similarities across plant and human worlds in watching a tiny being come to fruition. It is as if my newborn daughter, having just left a sensual, material, and instinctual place where all the world's babies are, has allowed me to be there also. In this uncertain time of anthropogenic disaster and frightening extinction, it is my assumption that if I try to understand plants as truly and vibrantly alive and animate—a Ponderosa pine and I might have so much to share in the way of birth stories, and the aspens know more about making family than I will ever know.

OFFERINGS

Birthing 1

When I went into labor with her, the seedling, the spore, the tiny naked mammal, mammimal, animal, whatever you wish to call it, it was as if the earth rumbled and counting me as part of her landscape threatened to split me open in order to create a new pathway for the water that was she, to flow. I sat at dinner dressed in a wrinkled black dress and perched on an uncomfortable wooden chair through several hours of early contractions while I watched my human relations laugh and slurp wine. I sunk into my throne of tree bones and became quiet and unsure as to what I was feeling, the deep convulsions, the shuddering ripples across my belly were even real. Dazed, I stared as the wine

seep through their human veins and saw how powerful those grape vines were to become be so delicious and so mood altering and so necessary to us, and considered my own cocktail of hormones making these convulsions happen, again so delicious, and so mood altering, and so necessary to us.

I fixed my gaze blankly at the apple tree wrapped in sparkling lights outside the restaurant and wondered what it felt like to make so many apples year after year, and if an apple blossom shifting into a fruit was felt deeply and painfully in the mother tree and if the sharp break of an apple leaving the branch and implanting in the soil reverberated in her body like how the girlchild was in mine now. My heart broke when I imagined the way a sprout curled close in its shell before bursting forth and expanding—it was just too delicate and breakable—the way the girlchild inside me was right now, head tucked to her chest and arms folded over each other in the floating universe of my body.

Most humans think of birth as a mammalian experience. Live birth is particularly valued in the hierarchies of living things, and you get even more points if your living thing comes out of your body with hair or eyes that can open. There is also no real understanding of what birth is for non-mammal bodies, and what the moment of giving birth looks or smells or feels like. Is it when the flower emerges all soft and veined or the when cone plumps up with potential or when the rhizome springs forth a sprout? When the blossoms are fertilized in a lovingly aggressive dance of stamens and ovules and bees? When the seed manages to reach the soil-womb of the forest floor? When the cotyledons¹⁰ creep forth from their shell? When it is clear that they will survive the first spring having avoided being taken out by hungry ants, neighboring plant species, and starvation, or uprooted by record rainfall? When it no longer relies so heavily on the carbon root milk their mother nurses them with through mycorrhizal networks?¹¹

Later, I lay in bed trying to sleep and gave in to the gravity and truth of this seedling in me attempting to poke through the soil of my body. Nobody really knows why birth starts, it is said to be something to do with the mother's body, and something to do with the baby's body, and possibly something to do with barometric pressure, though no one can prove any of this. We are the same as plants in this vague space. A flowing mess of evolution and environment and forces that feel like magic make us bloom or birth or sprout. It is the greatest transcorporeal surrender I had ever participated in.

Later, the midwife came and pushed her hand between my legs to confirm that indeed the very framework of my anatomy was bending and swaying its way open like a willow in a windstorm and I whimpered for mercy and the invasion of her arm in my tender opening body. I thought about times I had eagerly yanked the seed casing off baby seedlings impatiently when they popped through the soil or transplanted them in a hurry, ripping their roots

in the process. I promised to be more careful, more conscious, as another Earthquake shook over me.

The experience of labor and birth comes bridled with myths and stories and fear and custom and is bound tightly into the narrative of human experience and survival, yet we rarely if ever, consider the planting of flowers or strewing of cucumber seeds to be a spiritual and enormous act of helping other beings make themselves. Farmers sow their crops without attention paid to the divine act of watching life make itself, or homage to the plant mothers who entrusted their seeds to the womb of the world in hopes that just one might make it to bring her genetics to another generation. Humans say *I* give birth, and *I* raised and *made* futures for my children, but we say that “the squash sprouted,” and often attribute this to a bird dropping or a windfall, giving none of the agency to eons of tree mothers slowly adapting and working together toward creating and caring for their offspring, their root-children, their kin. We have so little respect for the reproductive functions of plant-life that we haphazardly plant fields or start garden projects and forget to water them, leaving on vacation, never considering the open and exposed uterus we left behind.

When my seedling finally struggled her way into the birth canal after a day and a half of my crawling and sweating and hanging onto countertops and stair rails, I pushed her out screaming and yelling at such a volume that I vaguely heard the midwife ask someone to shut the window so not to frighten the neighbors. One push and her head emerged, eyes open and clear, turning every which way to absorb the new reality though her shoulders were firmly stuck within me. Two pushes and she slithered to the Earth. I crouched with her, placenta still connected to her belly but no longer to mine. Like the plants, I realized I wasn't sure when she was born, and that we were all just bodies trying to make autonomy happen for our young in different stages. Was that moment when she slipped out of me the moment she was born? Or was she born two hours later when we disconnected her from the placenta, the last nutrient source I gave her so directly? Or was she born one week later when crying like the blubbery sentimental over-thinking parents we were we named her under a Poplar tree? When I stop breast-feeding her? Or was she born when she first touched her toes to the body of this planet we share?

Birthing 2 (Senescence)

I spent an entire arc of the sun being more on Earth than I had ever felt and

I scratched the ground with my knees and wept and watered the soil with my eyes and begged her body to emerge from the dark cavities of mine until I descended to a dark warm world where hours meant nothing and breathing was everything.

Human birth is reduced to numbers. It takes
 forty weeks for a human child to be full term
 if they are born at forty weeks and a day they are overdue
 if they are born at thirty-eight weeks they are branded early and
 first time labor is twelve to twenty-four hours long, and contractions are
 rarely serious until they are two or three minutes apart and the
 entire process of our fruiting bodies is reduced to notches on a ticking
 clock.

We desire it planned and scheduled but nothing this old works that way.
 We share this time with plants, the green mothers,
 this
 liminal floating space of urges and energy this
 realm of giving into the processes of body though we
 deem to control with Pitocin drips, slicing open lady bodies, asking for
 regimen and
 uniformity as if our flesh was made of something different than the
 solidity and stubborn matter of the Earth around it.

Anyone who has planted a smattering of basil seeds know that they will
 burst forth at different times, perhaps they were too hot or simply not ready
 deep in their cellularly dividing cores, cradled in their seed husk of a womb
 here we are in the horticultural space of seasons and urges
 of instincts and smells and water and sun
 here we are with them, the green bodies
 here they are, with us, us lost ones.

Domus

The story of Circe is most often known as the tale of a vengeful and hurt
 witch who angrily turns men into pigs when they arrive on her island Aeaea.
 It seems that the Odyssey rendered her the frustrated and disliked feminist
 in a patriarchal world of Gods knocking up mortals. She is not meant to be
 liked in this telling; she is a reflection for Odysseus's wit. However, she
 is also the ultimate housewife, trapped on an island, with only the plants
 and other animals for company. She must make her own life among the
 more-than-humans.

When I became a mother, I became Circe. My world seized up and shrank,
 then exploded in the tiny details of day-to-day domestic living, trapped on
 the island of my house with only my plants and small animal baby to speak
 to. I wallowed in dirt and food and diapers and simple repetitive labor. There
 are meditations to be found in domus, but they are slow to learn and involve
 little of the notoriety and attention the flashier parts of birthing and blooming
 hold. I believe I envisioned domesticity as somewhat romantic at one time. I

thought of all the ways I could ground myself with this time at home, and pay homage to the Earth, honor the plants, provide practical magic for my family by way of food, washing, growing, and tending.

On the good days, I am a witch at work at her hearth, the acts of labor and craft are old, meaningful, full of a desire to be closer to the elements around me. I am in transformation, the soil under my fingernails and knots in my hair make me meaningful and fluent in the practical spells and everyday magic of making walls, and floors and overhead beams and fire and cast iron and herbs into a home and dinner. My breasts swing heavy, full of milk, and I feel I could provide for everything and everyone, I am proud in my fertility, I am grounded in my consciousness. I am a nurse log. I am an old Banyan. The plants talk to me and I listen. I create microcosms of nutrients and calm. The girlchild and I move slowly through the world touching plants, doing chores, exploring facial expressions, songs, foods of this earth. I feel the sheer act of raising her among the trees and dirt and embodied chores that I am is an act of defiance. I take refuge in being like the plants-not needing the frivolous entertainments and constant motion of the industrial world.

On the less good days, the creep of household tasks threatens to strangle me and I have trouble forming sentences that sound not only like I do not have a doctorate but rather if I may never have read a book before. I cannot calm myself enough to see how the shared wordlessness I have in these moments with plants could be good. The dirt under my fingernails is disgusting and my hair works its way into a mass of un-ironic and un-cool dreadlocks. The weight of my breasts reminds me that I feel I roll them up to fit them into bras and there is no network of fungi and roots that is coming to my rescue. I am a sickly beech heading for winter. I say no spells, I feel alone.

These are the days I am also jealous of the aspens.

I had always loved these trees because they had seemed to figure out something about sitting still on a landscape, and making kin, that humans had either forgotten or had never known. Aspens grow in rhizomatic clonal colonies all hailing from a single seedling to make a giant multigenerational stand, and while individual trees only survive from around up to around 150 human years, the mass of roots can live for thousands. They seem to understand place and home and family in a way that I am still working on myself. Humans regard the freedom to leave the land of our parents as an ultimate success and show of independence and bravery, to avoid the work of maintaining home as an annoyance, but aspens are powerful in their numbers and their repetitive, dependable cycles of birth and rebirth, are strong in their knowledge of where the right place to propagate is and how to stay home and nurture and grow. How to be homes to so many species around them. They put in the work, and they do it slowly and surely. They are clear on the importance of ancient mychorrhizal networks the way some humans have faith and

respect at being part of a bloodline. They are sure of the quiet, understated, power of home. And like Circe, and hopefully myself one day: they know they are never alone.

Transcorporeal

This year she turns one and we will bake a cake and shower her with kisses on her still-bald scalp and congratulate ourselves on keeping the tiny disaster-prone animal alive for a year.

I feel so old, because I have seen every moment of her rapidly vibrant body—

thriving in fleshy multiples putting all parts of the planet in her mouth making them part of her making herself part of them.

She loves to suck gravel and chew on grass and if I say no she does it faster and wilder as if she vehemently opposes the possibility that these little material bodies around her were ever meant to be separate from her form

she thrives in the confidence of her mouth and her nose as the secret passage to knowing she is still more-than-human.

Every root every leaf every petal enter her form and even the acrid ones that make my tongue curl are of interest to her,

she never assumes they were ever not meant to infiltrate her belly, her nails, her pockets, her breath or

that the stuff of my breasts is any different than the stuff of this world outside of the two of us because the way

she presses to my chest and the way she touches the ground are with such similar urgency and familiarity

I want this, too. This urgent familiarity.

I now also wish to taste every leaf I see and know they probably can taste me too.

Mourning

Now she lives here. On this side, and her umbilical cord is cut and I drink wine and I can walk away from her body and soon she will walk away from mine.

Sometimes after a dusk of avoiding the news with the pandemics, and shooting, and alarming extinction I creep onto my bed and waver my hand over the baby's tiny mouth and hold my breath until I feel the humid fog of

her life on my palm and feel the immense weight of guiding her body through this perilous cartography of fear and change. I wonder if mother plants ever hold their stomata and listen for the oxygen exiting their offspring's leaves, just to be sure.

She curls asleep, mouth hanging open in an onesie printed with Redwood trees thought they may as well be printed with unicorns as this is how precarious those trees feel at times.

When she is old enough to choose her own clothing how many plants on her onesies will still be here? How many will live in fairy tales about greener times how will her

kindergarten teacher choose to explain how generations of mothers didn't pay attention to this coming (this hurts, we all did, I'm sure what we thought was best)

When I look at plant bodies I smell the loss of landscape, of familiar weather, of countless kin I taste the sadness and difficulty of protecting one's own.¹²

How, lodgepole pines have had their skin devoured from the inside their bodies already weak from smog and drought

how they release resin and sap to try and seal the open wounds over their wooded frames how we only care because trees are

pretty

because we need the lumber.

What must it feel like to be a bristlecone pine mother?

To have watched the eons flow by and the critters of the planet make moves underneath your shade and grow up and die and to have watched some of your babies grow up and die and be slowly chopped and culled

despite all the energy given to raise them tall and strong and connect them within the web of intimately bound trees where you live,

make them good community members who share what they can with those in need,¹³

know to warn others of danger,¹⁴

sleep deeply and soundly through the starry nights.¹⁵

Some of your babies

grow up and live long and interesting lives

To have felt the air and water around you change in hundreds of cycles and be quite sure your species are not personally responsible

How is it that we do not cry for the millions of cottonwood babies that cannot happen because the Rio Grande¹⁶ is dammed or

the infant mortality rate of those flowers that now bloom before the bumblebees are there to help it or refugee roots creeping uphill to avoid the scorching summer?

How can we not weep for the monumental wooden Pietas after forest fires who have lost the last year of seedlings? More painful than any marble statue could convey?

How can we not sob for the verdant diaspora
migrating north, far away from all the wild beings
they once knew.

IN CLOSING: MOTHERHOOD AS A SHARED IDENTITY

When I first was pregnant, I dreamed wildly every night, perhaps from the hormones or perhaps from the fact that procreating is really some other-worldly stuff. I dreamed of a lettuce sprout growing in my stomach, planted on the uterine wall, leaves waving gently in amniotic fluid. I saw my unborn baby cradled in soil, the webs of mycorrhizae fanning around her face and heart and feet in a fantastic weaving of nutrient-rich communication with me, the way my blood vessels would gently pulse around the lettuce sprout. I couldn't stop watching the more-than-human mothers. What if her progeny was born into the soil in a year that is destined to be full of draught? Are her tiny sprouts too close to one another so that even despite the carbon she will nurse them on through her roots they may die? Is she essentially the Birch octomom? How much there is to learn about relation-making from more-than-humans? How much there is to know about kin from this process?

In the gooey hormonal sea of growing someone, I felt I could be closer to mushrooms spreading spores and ponderosas dropping seedlings and coyotes spawning pups in a similar way to my unquestioning acceptance of an animist world full of personhoods that I had as a child. I wanted to grow babies that took little and gave lots to the ecosystem we live in, who looked for more similarities than differences in our plant kin. I made a pact to consider how trees mother without cradling their young and rhizomes make young through both their roots and their seeds, ever growing, with infinite possibilities for siblings. I hoped to help her see trees as other mothers and pay close attention to the kinships between more-than-humans and see them as no less important than the kinship between her and I. I chose to revisit the material similarities of my body with those of plants.

The stories surrounding motherhood, procreation, and environmental connection have several allegorical moments and complicated and contested representations in Western/ized culture. This can make figuring out how to be an ecological citizen, responsible mother, moral feminist, or animist kin-maker confusing, but as Martin Shaw (2020) says, if we have entered a story and know the allegory of it, it fails to be a living thing and joins the ranks of the many, many, living things are in dangerous peril of being extinct. Finding

the allegory of any of these topics or stances written about in the introduction is less important than expanding the frame for which motherhood is understood, and trusting that narratives and offerings are dynamic, and can come from all places, beings, bodies, and times, and are capable of teaching many different things.

Perhaps it is not so much what cultural narratives we tell ourselves about plants, or the more-than-human and motherhood, as how we decide to unravel them, and where we position ourselves in them. While humans certainly could do well to continue the creation of nourishing, more inclusive, more ingenious stories for this time, how might old experiences (like those of motherhood in addition to childhood) be positioned differently, reread, and reopened? How can considering the similar materiality of all things shift the way we consider personhood?

As I close this chapter, my daughter toddles around outside with pinesap smeared in her six maybe seven hairs. She has recently learned to wave and without my prompting, waves at people, chipmunks, dogs, and trees, as well as the occasional statue. It sounds insignificant, but the tiny reminder that we are, in fact, walking by many organisms in many bodies worthy of acknowledgement is endlessly helpful, as even though I currently spend quite a bit of time in commune with plants or in deep thought about them and the other bodies that make up the world, it still seems to take infinite practice. I am grateful for the experience of motherhood that offers these moments and years where empathy and relearning can be worked on, I am honored to know deeply that the birthing, breathing, mothering, world of plants and I have so much in common.

Author's Note: "Portions of this chapter were originally written as part of my 2019 dissertation, titled "Cartographies of roots: An Exploration of plant communication, place, and story."

NOTES

1. The term "more-than-human" is borrowed from Abram (2012) and while imperfect in its expression, is a critical move to avoid positioning nonhuman entities as normal and everything else as "other."

2. The use of "queendom" in place of kingdom is a conscious attempt to subvert the patriarchal language of taxonomy.

3. "Nature" is placed in quotes due to the lack of clarity on what this word actually means or refers to.

4. See Paul Kingsworth's (2020) essay "The Language of the Master" for more on this idea.

5. The use of the term “babies” is an intentional move to think of all species’ young as warranting the care and affection humans generally reserve for their own babies. Additionally, in regards to the “overall telos,” I am not positing that having babies is or will be necessarily normal or natural, only that most life forms as overall species re-propagate in some way or another.

6. See Clayton and Opatow’s (2003) edited volume for more on environmental identity.

7. I write “woman body” and “women” throughout as opposed to womyn, womxn, wimmin, or other more inclusive words as this is the term much of my extent literature uses and the body I identify as having.

8. Meaning, bodies that are considered to be only made up of themselves as opposed to other outside matter. See Allewaert’s (2013) explanation of “parahumanity” and Chen (2012) for more on this.

9. Here, Pollock (1998) uses a term by (Taussig 1989). Emphasis by Pollock (1998).

10. Cotyledons are the first leaves seedlings grow from the nutrients they have in their seed.

11. Work on tree kinship has shown that mother trees will often send nutrients to their genetically similar offspring, especially when that offspring cannot yet reach the sunlight (*see* Dudley and File 2007; Wohlleben 2016)

12. Here, the term “solastalgia” is echoed, or rather the loss of a familiar landscape (Albrecht et al. 2007; Albrecht 2006)

13. Simard et al. (1997) and Simard, Durall, and Jones (1997) showed that beech and fir trees can exchange nutrients depending on who has more to spare. Possibly, many species of plants do this.

14. Studies have shown that many plants can emit volatile chemical signals in distress that are understood by other plants (their own species and sometimes other species too) in the area so that they may increase their own defenses against predators (Heil et al. 2004; Karban et al. 2000; Karban, 2018)

15. According to Puttonen et al. (2016) study on birch trees, trees droop or “sleep” and night. Additionally, Bennie et al. (2016) work showed how artificial light pollution significantly alters the circadian rhythms of some plants.

16. The Rio Grande is an important river in the United States Southwest and Northern Mexico.

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