

THE VEGETAL WORLD

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Luce Irigaray, the feminist psychoanalyst, writes: “From my early infancy, the vegetal world has been my favorite dwelling.”¹ From my youth, I wanted the same. I had girlhood fantasies of climbing flowering redbuds and dogwoods, writing poems as I wove their blooms through my hair. The vegetal world and I did not come to terms, however. I was met with chickens filling the trees, territorial and not leaving a branch for me. I was hissed at and bitten by possums in the deadwood crevices where I attempted to store my writing journals. I was thwarted by a fear of heights, driven indoors by allergies to the flowers that should have adorned my head.

Perhaps I am *nonarborescent*: more rhizome than root, and perhaps this is an extension of being what someone dear to me deemed a “messy girl” and not a beautiful one: possum bites and red noses (Benadryl dozes) not flower crowns, placed amongst glass and steel instead of branches and leaves. So why am I here, to write to you about this exhibition *Family Tree Whakapapa*?² Wouldn’t you rather hear from Irigaray, who nestled sheep in baby carriages because she couldn’t bear a heartbeat-less doll? (I owned more porcelain dolls than I ever had living creatures, I couldn’t stand to feel their heartbeats, it was too much control, too much life to have end.) It’s simple; and let me share two points: I have made peace with my tree-love and am writing to you now from my very own treehouse. It’s true! Leaves and moths have flown into my hair, I am writing essays on a laptop and not journals, but nothing has bitten me in days. Second, Irigaray’s writing partner is quick to point out to her that none of these things are oppositional binaries. All are bound up together and need each other. He, Michael Marder, says:

A return to nature, especially to vegetal nature, is impossible outside the cultivation of humanity as a relation – a sharing of the world or of worlds – at least between two. Just as the elaborations of the meaning of being human are deficient and one-sided when they do not account for sexuate difference, so our relation to the nonhuman world is stunted if it does not develop with the shared contribution of all differently sexuated human beings. My question for you in this regard is: How many worlds participate in this relation? Yours and mine, to be sure, as well as, perhaps our shared world. But what about plants? Do they too constitute a world? Can they be “others”? Or do they belong somewhere on the hither side of the distinction between the same and the other.³

I ask this same question of you, when you view these works of and on and through and for trees, made by artists and sisters and teachers and mothers and women: How many worlds participate in these relations? What are these relations? Of trees and family? Of kin and kindling? Genes and genealogy? Which parts of you are water and which parts of you are fire? And what does it mean that soon, without intervention, the world will both drown and burn? (That it already is?)

First, I want to talk to you about roots and rhizomes.

ROOTS AND RHIZOMES

In Sarah Slavick’s series, *Elegy to the Underground* (2020), there are roots. As with icebergs and the best of people, sizeable parts of trees are underneath the surface. Roots are often called “the

organ of the plant,” and they help with food storage, prevent soil erosion, absorb water and nutrients, and of course, they root the plant to the ground, they keep it in place, they give it grounding. In *Elegy* we don't see the tree above ground, just these vast and branching roots (branches branch, too, and roots root, but also branch; they break off in binary patterns, two from one from each branching root, and so on and so on, until they are so small they become imperceptible).

Family trees, hierarchies, can give roots. And so, the theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term *arborescent* – it comes from how genealogical (family) trees are drawn: linear and progressive with uninterrupted binary divisions. They write that, “binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree.”⁴ For them, its organizational structure “charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source of ‘things’ and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those ‘things.’”⁵ It is the narrative of history for our human-temporality. (We make trees for ourselves because we have trouble fathoming tree-time.) It's the barbarous construct we build to climb and compete for sunlight. We fill the pages of books that we make from trees with these stories, genealogical and filial, indebted to our parents, that are made to steal their sunlight for ourselves. Yet, Deleuze and Guattari say, “The mind lags behind nature.”⁶

They instead propose rhizomes to counter the hierarchy of trees and roots, a planar and trans-species mutualism in which different species work together to form a multiplicity. (We will see this later, as “making kin,” but we could also see this now as sisters and brothers bound not by filial ranks, but union lines.) A rhizome resists hierarchical, binary organizations of power and establishes never-ending connections between all things. It doesn't narrativize history and culture but tries to plant a map of connections, for “a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle...”⁷

But really, rhizomes are not so different from roots. Both aid in the storage of food, and the word “rhizome” means “mass of roots”

in Greek. I want a mess of masses, not straight divisional lines. Sarah's images give us the roots and lines and webs and nodes and tangles. And although the word may descend from “mass of roots,” a rhizome today refers to a stem. Differences from roots: rhizomes tend to grow parallel to the ground, not down into it; they have nodes and internodes which roots do not; they have the power of vegetative propagation. (You can snap a piece off and start it up again. If you break up a rhizome into parts, each part will begin to grow again, anew, they propagate so easily!) Examples of rhizomes: ginger, asparagus, hops, bamboo, orchids.

Ironically, what we think of as a “tree” (how Deleuze and Guattari differentiate it from a rhizome and their rhizomatic way of thinking) is not the root, which is what is truly different from the rhizome, but the branch. What Deleuze and Guattari are arguing against, what they put up their rhizome in favor of, is also a rhizome. Branches are stems! Stems are rhizomes! A rhizome is characterized by nodes, and nodes are where blossoms and blooms come from. What is the family tree made of? Roots? No, branches. Or is it both? Or is it neither? A family tree is a human tree, it is our imposed human-time onto a temporality and lived experience that isn't ours, so it won't work.

How literal or metaphorical should we be in all of this? We have trees as a model of genealogy and a model of semiological structure, but we also have rhizomes and ecosystems and a global climate (changing) and families and roots. Trees do not exist outside of inter-relational ecosystems; they are inter-relational ecosystems. Family trees and trees are not separate or combined, the material of the metaphor is one in the same.

Sarah's works here do not merely give us roots; they give us nodes and webs and points of light. They place the roots into the world, and not just our world; we must have all former and latter, roots and rhizomes. We can project a model of genealogy that accounts for both filiation and relation, beyond a singular line of descent that results in the present, but with directions elsewhere, specific, general, human, non-human, genetic and affective; one of the

interdependence of life and the interdependence of death into a unified ecosystem that exceeds one's knowledge of their present and their past (and their future).

Here is where my great grandmother met my great grandfather, and they had my grandmother, or my grandfather, but here is the smell of earth where they planted corn to chop into silage to feed to cows and here is where they heard a peacock make a remarkable noise, and here is where the color of that peacock lives, and here is where they fought over their first sadness, and here is where I was something they imagined but never knew, and here is where my mother held my grandfather's hand when he could no longer speak and told him that I would exist in a world he would not, and here is the feeling of the way his hand squeezed hers, here is its light, right there: next to the noise of the peacock. Look at these images Sarah has given us, look at these branches and nodes and webs and glows, what will you put there (what will you allow the world to hold there with you)? We cannot simply branch where one joins one and they create another who joins another and branches off again to two to two to two – binary, binary. What Sarah shows us is a tree that is not constrained by the temporality of human genealogy, thank goodness.

TREES AND TREES

So, a root is not a rhizome, but a branch is a stem, and a stem is a rhizome. A family tree is arborescent and so is a tree, although it is filled with rhizomes. What is a tree? What is a family? Much like the second, the first has no true definition; it's what you make of it. There are nuclear families and nuclear trees (look at elin o'Hara slavick's *Fukushima Persimmon Tree Heavy with Contaminated Fruit or A-Bombed Hiroshima Tree*). There are chosen families and chosen trees.⁸ Trees are not a taxonomic group, there is no universal definition of a tree, they include any plant which has independently evolved a trunk and branches as a way to compete for sunlight.⁹ (It really just comes down to height, and there is no difference between a bush and a tree except for how tall each grows.) I would like to agree with professor Jim Tokuhisa: (he is

talking about trees, but isn't the same true for families?) "A tree is defined by who you are."¹⁰

Trees also define who we are. Trees are the base of basically all cultural and faith traditions throughout the world; the "tree of life" is a fundamental and widespread concept no matter the myth, religion, or philosophy. Susanne Slavick's series, in much the same way Sarah's does, shows us the sheer inability to divorce metaphor and material, to attempt to take apart and bring together our time and tree-time, even as one destroys the other and vice-versa. Trees come before us, sometimes from heaven, and almost always before earth. One Iroquois myth, *The World on the Turtle's Back*, describes one such tree of life, and when a pregnant woman fell from heaven (where all humans first lived), she fell into an endless sea. A turtle saved her, and she formed the world on its back by planting bark from the celestial tree. Susanne paints designs from "Tree of Life" carpets from different cultures over landscapes devastated by the impact of humans. The environment has become a powderkeg produced by the centuries long impact of human industrialization, a match struck with those same actions, or our own carelessness, inaction; from commercial logging, to collecting firewood, to parties and play and pretense. With her works, Susanne shows these impacts, but also refuses the easy role of victim for the trees. These trees do not lie down or surrender, but rise up in persistence.

Susanne's *Tree of Life: Yellowstone* displays pastel blues and pinks, gorgeous reds with yellow cores, birds and branches and blooms explode, loom-like from a vase, itself standing on an intricate pedestal, all growing up, swirling out. (The movement of this Persian rug pattern is meant to echo spiritual growth and the motion of the faithful in *salah*.) Instead of the movement of prayer, echoing the up and out swirls, the gorgeous spiral, is a dark, sparse trunk. Blackened branches curled from heat, only smoking embers for whatever might remain to rest on, no pedestal. *Tree of Life: Temagami Forest* shows not the effects of fire but deforestation. Either way, the destruction is quick, complete, and man-made. The amount of our time taken to make a beaded or loomed or plastered thing is so much and so little in the face of this.

Trees gave us a home when we were drowning, gave us stories when we had none. We imposed these homes and stories onto them until they were drowning and burning.

A HOME, A NEST, A HOUSE, A TREE

Can we build houses from our family lines? A house of bones and love: a family tree is a mass grave, both the horror and triumph of history. Can we hold our loved ones close, keep warm, have meals, sleep soundly, breathe easily within the dead remains of those who birthed us?

What is the house that made this exhibition made of? What does it look like, this family tree? It might be lined with trees, the hemlocks of Maine, or paper from trees, pages and pages of art books on Impressionism, gifted at Christmas, prints of Käthe Kollwitz, memories of Medieval and Baroque churches filling their collective minds' eye.¹¹ Art was a priority, such a priority and a gift and a filling that they could have shouted "we've seen enough!"

These pages might fill their house, their eyes, and despite a call of seeing enough, to see enough is to be flooded out so that you are ready for more. Many sisters, many artists. Where is the metaphor and where is the material? Root or rhizome? They might (and have) wondered why so many ended up pursuing art. Their home was also filled with (and emptied out by) words and words, in more than one language. A doorjamb of letters to editors, creaky floorboards of American, French and German Literature, and word games. A weight of words, a head full of voices not your own, of spoken, written and translated language standing out against the paper walls, sucking air but giving voice.

When we say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, this is a misnomer, of course. The apple has seeds which must be spread. If they are only spread as far as the base of its parent-tree, the new growth will wither under that parent, die from lack of sunlight. The apple has to go far, far from the tree. Its seeds spread to an open patch of light and air and soil so that it can grow tall enough

to bloom and spore and perhaps the pollen from those spores will pass on the wind, and they may pass the pollen of the parent tree and maybe they will know each other, maybe they will be proud, they will be tall together and have enough light and enough energy from that light for themselves to give to each other.

Pollen floating in the wind, like poetry read in a loop. Here, in this exhibition we can feel this too. The words from the house, and other houses read into the air, in this vestibule. Poems as entrance and exit, past and present. *One leaf, one / moment.*¹²

This looping of word and image, past and present, makes me think of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and how he mentions, no less than four times the fact that Sir Joseph Paxton's great achievement of modernity, the Crystal Palace, was great because it was built for trees:

Chosen as a site for the exhibition was the finest park in London, Hyde Park, which offered in the middle a wide-open meadow, traversed along its shorter axis by an avenue of splendid elms. But anxious onlookers soon raised a cry of alarm lest these trees be sacrificed for the sake of a whim. 'Then I shall roof over the trees,' was Paxton's answer ... To build a palace out of glass and iron seemed to the world, in those days, a fantastic inspiration for a temporary piece of architecture. We see now that it was the first great advance on the road to a wholly new world of forms ... the preservation of the magnificent row of trees for the central transept was of capital importance.¹³

This example brings me to the photographs of Madeleine Slavick. And perhaps, they allow a post-apocalyptic vision which comes after Susanne's endangered but persistent trees of life. These photographs are moments where the natural world seems to desire containment within a modern architecture of glass and steel (and vice-versa), or to be play-acting, rehearsing for a world after the end of humanity.

Madeleine's *Lattice*, a cluster of thirteen photographs, creates an autobiographical context of place around the central *Self Portrait for Oma* – a shadow beneath descending boughs of a willow tree in Stuttgart. We are rooted by this shadow; the surrounding images branch out into the artist's whakapapa. Within one of these images, *Theatre*, house shingles are painted leaf-green, as if to live amongst the larger trees behind it. *Supermarket and Tree*, with the same brilliant white and green of paint and darker green of leaves, shows a white brick wall, with neon green paint on top. The wall has been overtaken by a resilient tree, its roots rise up from gravel, create graffiti against the brick, and then the leaves meet the neon green in turn. Like the shingles trying to be leaves, the leaves are trying to be brick. Or the reverse, there is no start and end, there is no copy and model, rhizomes.

A bush peeking out from the bright white siding within *Theatre*, the same bright green as the roof, as the brick from *Supermarket and Tree* makes me wonder if it doesn't want to make a home in this home, be invited inside, become a branch on the residents' human family tree instead. (Again, there is no difference between tree and bush except size – perhaps the new residence will help the bush grow and become a tree, like the tree behind the house, which looms a darker color.)

That is what I want to see in these images. Where once we tried to put ourselves into tree-time, long and slow, a temporality we can barely see happening, now trees miss us, and they are trying to put their tree-time to ours, to speed up their temporality in waggish ways. In *Theatre*, the shadow of a palm encroaches on the house. The tree is coming home but cannot go inside.

As witnessed in works such as *Bagged Sign as Tree*, *Fire Station Tree*, and *Sign as Tree*, Madeleine endows inanimate objects with life. In *Cone as Tree*, a glorious natural scene plays out: swirling clouds, sprawling mountain ranges, sunbeams and shadow. A center tree is the crowning glory of this vision, but in front of it is a small orange cone. I love this cone. I love this cone as I would (and do) love a rabbit that stops for me but not in fear, I love it as I

would (and do) love my niece when she tilts her head just so, arms akimbo, and lets her exasperation at the world flow. She isn't showing the adult she will someday be; she is embodying the adult she wants to be here and now, that she sees in the here and now. And that is this cone; it is trying with all its might to fit into this majestic scene, to be the trees that surround it, not the tree it will someday be (how could it!) but to live among them and not be laughed at, to not be startled and scared away. Still, I do laugh at this cone, as I continue to walk towards the rabbit and smirk at my niece. The rabbit runs away, my niece stomps her foot, this cone; what will it do? It has no roots to make it stay, even though it casts a shadow just as long as the trees around it.

This is what I want these images to be. (Even while I know it impossibly and problematically both affirms and denies absolute otherness.) If we have no care for what burns around us, until we are gone, and they are not, what will they do? How will they remember us? *Sebago Laundry and Tree* shows two towels (one white, one green, a satisfying echo of *Theatre*) hanging on a line but overtaken by growth; a leaf covered branch has draped itself over the white towel, caressing the fabric, smoothing it down. When we have burned, who will do our laundry? Why will the trees carry out our chores for us when we are gone? Why do they do it now?

KIN

The layers of soil where roots grow is often referred to as the "rhizosphere." A tree and wildflower expert once decried this area, where plants and fungi and animals and microorganisms all need to live together, as a "war zone." To see the rhizosphere as embattled is a highly human viewpoint. Yet, what do you see when you look at elin's *A-Bombed Weeping Willow Tree*? This supported, solarized, trussed and weeping tree? The tree, a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, has been taken care of by the city, which goes through great pains to insure its continued growth in the face of disaster. In it and these acts, I see a cyborg, in the sense that Donna Haraway describes the "chimera" of a mythic time that "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machines

and organism.”¹⁴ Haraway expands on this mythic intertwining in her book *Staying With the Trouble*; she explains that in the face of a quickly changing planet, individuality cannot be maintained, and action and agency need to be reframed beyond the frames of humanism. Our relationship with time has to change, but also our relationship to ourselves as humans. A vast de-centering must occur, what Haraway deems “making kin” with all kinds of non-human “critters.” Haraway explains that “The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.”¹⁵

How can we make kin if we view the soil as a war zone? Let’s look some more. What do you see when you look at *Hackberry Tree*? It could be a war zone, craters made by bombs, or the moon with craters made by meteorites, or the back of my grandmother’s hand with craters made by time, or the bark of a hackberry tree with craters made by natural growth. Without bark, the energy from a tree’s leaves cannot make the trip to the roots and back again (the phloem does all this, and it needs the bark for protection and strength).

Can you imagine making kin? Truly? Of not being human? Try. Look at *Fukushima Persimmon Tree Heavy with Contaminated Fruit*. What do you see as this new being?

It’s fine if you cannot. Some objects are so vast, their temporality or spatiality is difficult, if not impossible to assimilate to human perception. I think trees can be this way. Literary critic and ecologist Timothy Morton explains things like this – things so vast that they challenge objecthood – as “hyperobjects.” Hyperobjects include Styrofoam (it lives so long!) and global warming.

We can understand radiation and nuclear disasters as hyperobjects. How can one understand the “thingness” of an unseen thing, its danger so real and visible while it itself cannot be perceived? How can it be made visible? Much of elin’s work helps to reveal these hidden agencies. Cyanotype works such as *Chinese Parasol Leaf from an A-Bombed Tree* reveal the complex interconnection

between the sun’s rays, so easy to ignore, leaves, half-life time, and paper, all revealed in the beautiful after-image.

In *Fukushima Persimmon Tree Heavy with Contaminated Fruit*, the process of solarization does similar work. Solarization is one of the oldest effects within photography’s history and it is almost always discovered, or best known, thanks to light (the sun). What is left unseen, in its title of Fukushima? Jean Luc-Nancy claims that nuclear disasters create a new form of being in the world: a lack of futurity, a new interconnected disastrousness, the need to reconcile with the fact that we are the first few generations able to end ourselves.¹⁶ Is it surprising that we find it so hard to visualize this? He writes, “A proper noun is always a way to pass beyond signification. It signifies itself and nothing else. About the denomination that is that of these two names [Hiroshima and Fukushima], we could say that instead of passing beyond, they fall below all signification. They signify an annihilation of meaning.”¹⁷

Photography is good at this revealing, even if those who control the process may not always be. Julian Webb, a physicist working for Kodak during the Manhattan Project’s testing in New Mexico, and then again for the first atomic detonation in Nevada, discovered that water and air contaminated during these occasions carried radiation far further than anyone had guessed possible. Webb found fogging on Kodak’s x-ray film, film located in Indiana and New York. When looking for the source of their product’s faults, he found it caused by “a new type radioactive containment not hitherto encountered.”¹⁸ The spread of dangerous radiation from New Mexico and Nevada all the way to Indiana and New York, carried by water and air moving eastward across the United States, was never revealed to the public. Kodak attempted to sue the US government for damages to their product. Eventually Kodak and the American military-industrial complex came to the agreement of letting Kodak know about future testing in advance, so the manufacturer could preemptively protect their product.¹⁹

Now look at *Fukushima Persimmon Tree Heavy with Contaminated Fruit* again. How can we see this being and work?

One way to think, or see, or change thinking: Morton reminds us that ecological writing usually says that we are “embedded” in nature. He writes,

Nature is a surrounding medium that sustains our being. Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society. It is a small operation, like tipping over a domino.... Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.²⁰

When we admire the beauty from afar of elin’s *A-Bombed Hiroshima Tree*, the image framed with dappling light and a bright world beyond our view, when we place trees on the pedestal Morton speaks of, it’s easy to miss the pedestal the tree itself relies on. Not one of damning admiration, but gentle support placed there after the bombing of Hiroshima, poles placed there to help this being, a tree which will live longer than most, if not all, who witnessed the atrocities of the United States. These supports will help it stand in the face of this history and continue on. We see this tree and bury the story of why it needs supports, we bury nuclear waste into the earth, into the rhizosphere – calling it a warzone as we use it to shield ourselves from the evidence or our own wars. We support and bury and embed while being embedded and supported. Break out of the act of sadistic admiration.

Is that easy? Is it that hard? Change your view and way of thinking and centering? Are you kin or kindling? Which is the world to you?

- 1 Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 9.
- 2 Whakapapa often translates from te reo Māori as “genealogy” and exists as a “taxonomic framework that links all animate and inanimate, known and unknown phenomena in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds”. See <https://teara.govt.nz/en/whakapapa--genealogy/page--1>
- 3 Ibid., 112.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5.
- 5 Laura Felt, *Rhizome*, July 10, 2012
- 6 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 6.
- 7 Ibid., 25
- 8 What is your chosen tree? Here is one to think of: The Mercer Oak in Princeton, New Jersey.
- 9 Some trees do not even have to be made of wood: Cyatheales grow up to 20 meters and are made of only rhizomes. They are my messy mass.
- 10 Jim Tokuhisa, *DOE Office of Science*, “Newton Ask a Scientist.” <https://web.archive.org/web/20131206131101/http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/askasci/bot00/bot00761.htm>
- 11 And a home with a basement, to be sure. A basement made of teaching; the words were for teaching (no metaphor) and the basement was for teaching (no metaphor) and the teaching had roots that spread and spread to all of their adult lives.
- 12 This is a poem by Madeleine Slavick, with te reo Māori translation by Rawiri Smith: Kotahi ake te rau, kotahi / ake te wā. Visitors to the exhibition may also sit and listen to the artists’ recorded readings of poems, by themselves and others, with a live tree placed in the vestibule of the Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History’s Wesley Wing.
- 13 Walter Benjamin citing Julius Lessing, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [G6; G6a, 1], 183-184.
- 14 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2016), 150.
- 15 Ibid., 1.
- 16 “Our time – as it has been able to see itself at least since the first world war – is the era that knows it is capable of an ‘end of days’ that would be a deed created by humans.” Jean Luc-Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, Charlotte Mandell (trans.) (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 19-21.
- 17 Ibid., 13.
- 18 Matt Blitz, “When Kodak Accidentally Discovered A-Bomb Testing,” *Popular Mechanics*, June 20, 2016 <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/energy/a21382/how-kodak-accidentally-discovered-radioactive-fallout/>
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4-5.