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Contemporary Tree Poems and the Goals of Ecopoetry

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ecological aesthetics and ethics of contemporary poetry about trees and forests, arguing that developments in forest science and plant biology have transformed how we conceptualize the relationship between nature and culture. Drawing on recent research into mycorrhizal networks ("the wood wide web") and systems thinking, the study traces a shift from anthropocentric views toward a "networked kinship consciousness" that emphasizes multispecies interdependency. Through close readings of works by poets such as Robert Hass, Dan Bellm, Tim Seibles, August Kleinzahler, Jane Hirshfield, Alice Oswald, Forrest Gander, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Linda Hogan, the paper illustrates how ecopoetry models a non-anthropocentric ethic of kinship. It concludes by comparing these poetic strategies with the regenerative narrative visions of tree habitats in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke, advocating for "wildcrafting" and regenerative practices as essential cultural work in the era of the Anthropocene.

Index Terms: ecopoetry • forest science • mycelial networks • contemporary poetry • nature-culture symbiosis • Anthropocene • kinship studies • tree poems

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contemporary Tree Poems and the Goals of Ecopoetry

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Abstract

This essay explores the ecological aesthetics and ethics of contemporary poetry about trees and forests, arguing that developments in forest science and plant biology have transformed how we conceptualize the relationship between nature and culture. Drawing on recent research into mycorrhizal networks ("the wood wide web") and systems thinking, the study traces a shift from anthropocentric views toward a "networked kinship consciousness" that emphasizes multispecies interdependency. Through close readings of works by poets such as Robert Hass, Dan Bellm, Tim Seibles, August Kleinzahler, Jane Hirshfield, Alice Oswald, Forrest Gander, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Linda Hogan, the paper illustrates how ecopoetry models a non-anthropocentric ethic of kinship. It concludes by comparing these poetic strategies with the regenerative narrative visions of tree habitats in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke, advocating for "wildcrafting" and regenerative practices as essential cultural work in the era of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: *ecopoetry, forest science, mycelial networks, contemporary poetry, nature-culture symbiosis, Anthropocene, kinship studies, tree poems*

Correspondence: Peter Schmidt

1 Introduction

> "The things she catches Doug-firs doing, over the course of these years, fill her with joy. When the lateral roots of two Douglas-firs run into each other underground, they fuse. Through those self-grafted knots, the two trees join their vascular systems together and become one. Networked together underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads, her trees feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive, pool their resources and metabolites into community chests.... It will take years for the picture to emerge. There will be findings, unbelievable truths confirmed by a spreading worldwide web of researchers in Canada, Europe, Asia, all happily swapping data through faster and better channels. Her trees are far more social than even Patricia [Westerford] suspected. There are no individuals. There aren't even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest. Competition is not separable from endless flavors of cooperation."
>
> —Richard Powers, *The Overstory*[a]

[a]Richard Powers, *The Overstory*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018, p. 142.

In 2005, Robert Hass published his poem "The Problem of Describing Trees" reminding us of the limits of language in describing what trees do and why. He also wryly suggested that it is "good for poetry sometimes to disenchant us," even as in the three lines that conclude the poem, Hass insisted on enchantment: he chants a song celebrating our stubborn human ability to image rooted trees *dancing*.[1]

Since Hass's poem appeared, more knowledge has emerged from plant biologists about how even a huge grove of aspen trees is actually a single organism/community—and one that can (slowly) migrate. Hass focuses on the paradox that it's hard for poems to describe life in motion, either for trees or for other beings, including people, either in a small scale (such as making vivid a particular moment) or over a long time span. But in the two decades that have passed since Hass' poem was published, forest science has made the "problem of describing trees" even more profound. (And Hass would be delighted with such developments. He keeps up with both science and with poetry).

Two elements regarding aspen have emerged from recent research: that a forest of aspen is often a single widely distributed root mass, and that such a root system can migrate if it has to. [2] Such features essential to the species' resilience are invisible to human beings unless we know how to look and understand more deeply. Our cliché of distinguishing the forest from its trees is an attempt to undertake systems thinking, that is, how to understand how a whole has features and powers that cannot be understood by focusing on its individual parts. But the forest/tree cliché is an oversimplification of how scientists over the last few decades have come to understand how forests work as ecosystems. Our knowledge of forests composed of many trees, not just aspen, has also exponentially been transformed in recent decades. Not only do trees of the same species share resources via their underground networks, but a "forest" is comprised of networks linking many different *kingdoms*—plants, animals, microbes, and fungi—and a vast number of different species. Overlapping networks of communication and nutrient exchange extend both above and below ground, visible and

[1]Hass's "The Problem of Describing Trees" is from *Time and Materials. Poems 1997-2005*. New York: Ecco (Harper Collins), 2007. See also: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/06/27/the-problem-of-describing-trees. Accessed April 12, 2026.

[2]See Zach St. George, *The Journeys of Trees: A Story About Forests, People, and the Future*. New York: Norton, 2020. Two other recommended books: Wohlleben, Peter, and S Simard. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*. Translated by Jane Billinghurst, David Suzuki Institute, 2016; and Farmer, Jared. *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees*. mBasic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2023.

invisible to the human eye. As shown by *The Overstory* excerpt above, whose fictional Patricia Westford was modeled on actual forest scientists, including Suzanne Simard, the wood wide web may also become a way of understanding highly functional, diverse, and adaptive networks of human communities, including those built by scientists.

Further, a forest's work of building and decomposing goes on continuously, as Alison Deming reminds us in her poem celebrating fungi's role in forests, "This Ground Made of Trees": "a million lives work/ at metabolizing/ what came before them." The decomposer networks in a forest are often invisible (unless you know how to look), but they are just as important as the photosynthesis process in leaves that generates the fuel that helps plants build things. Poets have long been fascinated with mushrooms, though in earlier centuries they were often seen as monstrous—as in Dickinson's poem #1350 comparing a mushrooms to an "Elf" or Judas Iscariot.[3] But interest by poets in fungi has mushroomed in the last decades too, as evidence emerges that forests couldn't exist without mycelial networks. There's even an anthology *Decomposition*, collecting fungi-inspired poems (2010).[4] Deming's line above describes mushrooms' role in an ecosystem, but Pattiann Rogers' "Geocentric" enacts in language what mushrooms do. Her funky, fervent catalogue ode doesn't just celebrate forest recycling; she revels in recycling lingo too, remixing a wide range of words connoting hell, decay, sex, poison, and rebirth, their negatives now all made positive:

> "
> malodorous rut
> and scarp, all sulfur fissures
> and fetid hillside seepages, old
> *old*, dependable, engendering
> forever the stench and stretch
> and warm seethe of inevitable
> putrefaction, nobody
> loves you as I do. (72)

In what ways may *poems* inspired by forests and new developments in forestry science also model how to value interdependency and both an aesthetic and an *ethic* shaped when interdependence is valued? Can tree poems give not just models but dramatic enactments of networks at work? The hypothesis tested in this essay is that, yes, tree poems not only map for us multiple new ways of thinking about both forests and trees, but they give us an ethic and aesthetic that are essential to the cultural work that ecopoetry does amidst the poisons of the Anthropocene. Forests and their fungal networks break down and recycle poisons as well as dead matter, making it possible to build anew. Perhaps some poems do similar work with our languages and our consciousness?

What's emerging globally over the last few decades is a field of inquiry that might be called Gaia kinship studies, an interdisciplinary field that has broad implications for studying culture, including literature and literary history, inspired in part by current developments in forestry and the study of other ecosystem dynamics. For instance, consider this question posed by *Practice*, one collection in the multi-volume essay anthology *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations* published by the Center for Humans and Nature in 2021: "From the perspective of kinship as a recognition of nonhuman personhood, of kincentric ethics, and of kinship as a verb involving active and ongoing participation, how are we to live?" Exploring answers to those questions guides the entire *Kinship* anthology project. Similarly, the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals in 2025 released its *Status of the Tribes and Climate Change Report*, documenting both the challenges faced and how traditional ecological knowledge and practices (TEK) are increasingly being used to manage ecosystems, treating the land and water and the species residing there as kin deserving our care, not solely as a resource to be used. The next section of this essay briefly assesses these developments, for they point to a way beyond passive despair that nothing can now be done to stave off climate disaster.[5]

The bulk of this essay surveys representative contemporary poets on seeing trees as well as forests, including the ways in which single trees in a healthy forest become their own micro-communities. What emerges is both an array of diverse solutions to "the problem of describing trees" and methods for mapping the network of relations among species that make up a forest. Bellm uses the study of one of the largest and oldest life-forms on the planet—a huge "forest" of aspen trees that is actually a single biological entity—to meditate on conflicting ways to understand what Baudelaire called the "forest" of "correspondences" that are poetic literary tradition.[6] He's intentionally honoring Hass' poem but also revising/recycling it. Seibles is fascinated by the relentless will in plants to survive and reproduce, versus the many ways in which humans try to kill them; this tension generates the poet's own meditations on survivance. Kleinzahler finds nature embedded in the midst of an industrial highway network. Hirshfield gives us a set of sly Zen paradoxes to shake her readers' assumptions about what the use value of trees might be to us. Several poems from Oswald's collection *Woods etc.* explore kinship relations with other beings, including an owl and a leaf as well as an ancient forest. Gander and Holten build a poem of a map of interspecies relations within a redwood forest from its overstory to its roots. Finally, capping this essay's middle section, poems by Native poets Baca and Hogan use trees and other beings to transform their understanding (rather like Oswald and Seibles) of human potential. Baca ends his poem with a celebration reconnecting himself to a kinship network of both mortal and immortal beings. Daringly, Hogan crafts her poem's speaker to be more-than-human; its "voice" morphs from being a single tree to that of species—and then concludes by offering us humans the wisdom of the life-force beyond all the beings in Creation. Although inspired by tree rings, Hogan rings changes on ways to apprehend the universe as a forest of kinship relations. Poetry's job for Hogan, as for the other poets studied here, is to wrench us readers away from our ingrained narcissism, our anthropocentrism. They find in trees' and forests' branching kinship networks the perfect analogy for nudging self-centered readers to think differently.

I conclude with a consideration of J. R. R. Tolkien, focusing on Galandriel's gifts to Samwise Gamgee in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. I then compare Tolkien's epic's ending with that of Hiyao Miyazaki's eco-parable film *Princess Mononoke*. Ending with these two great storytellers in media other than poetry allows me to re-frame how to understand the causes of ecocide and the ways forward suggested by the poems and prose considered in the body of this essay. For both Tolkien and Miyazaki unforgettably remind us that tree habitats model

[3]Emily Dickinson, "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants": https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56458/the-mushroom-is-the-elf-of-plants-1350.

[4]Deming's poem is in *Decomposition: An Anthology of Fungi-Inspired Poems*, edited by Renée Roehl and Kelly Chadwick. Sand Pointe, Idaho: Lost Roads Press, 2010, pp. 110-11. So is Rogers' "Geocentric," 72.

[5]Van Horn, Gavin, et al., eds. *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations.* Center for Humans and Nature, 2021.

Status of Tribes and Climate Change Working Group. (2025). *Status of Tribes and Climate Change*, Vol. 2 (B. M. Panek, Ed.). Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Northern Arizona University. http://nau.edu/staccreport.

For two accounts detailing instances where tribes have (often after long legal battles) won back their rights to manage ecosystems in portions of their traditional homelands, see Solnit and O'Reilly. Rebecca Solnit, *The Beginning Comes After the End*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2026).

Katie O'Reilly, "The Reciprocity Way. Indigenous knowledge and climate science combine to chart a path forward. *Sierra* 111.1 (Spring 2026).: 6-7.

[6]Baudelaire, "Correspondences." For a good translation, I recommend Daisy Fried, *The Year the City Emptied / After Baudelaire.* Chicago: Flood Editions, 2022. 48.

both *an aesthetic and an ethic of networked kinship consciousness* that is non-anthropocentric, involves multispecies interrelationships, and draws no strict line separating "nature" and "culture."

For context, it's worth asking what contemporary prose writers and activists are doing with the theme of trees' branching networks and the responsibilities we humans face. There is no room to do even a brief survey of relevant recent writings on how humans for eons have linked expansions of human consciousness to trees and their miraculous powers. But I provide here a core sample beyond the Richard Powers *Overstory* quotation used as an epigraph above. It will be evocative, not exhaustive. Remember that the root of evocative is *to give voice*.

Listen to the novelist and historian Amitav Ghosh, from *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 2021:

> "[I]t has long been accepted, by many millions of people, that a trans-species encounter, at a specific historical juncture, was essential to the Enlightenment of one particular human, Prince Siddhartha Gautama. ... What does this tell us? It tells us, first of all, that certain kinds of trans-species associations cannot be understood by the methods of science. ...Second, it tells us that an awareness of trans-species encounters of this sort have always existed among humans. [Here Ghosh mentions a story associated with St. Francis.] ...
> When and how did a small group of humans come to believe that other beings, including a majority of their own species, were incapable of articulation and agency? How were they able to establish the idea that nonhumans are mute and without minds, as the dominant wisdom of the time?
> An essential step toward the silencing of nonhuman voices was to imagine that only humans are capable of telling stories. ("Brute" 60-61)

Next, the novelist Tommy Orange, recounting things he was never told when he grew up in Oakland, California, not even when he went on school "field trips" to nearby redwood trees:

> "[T]he trees I was visiting were second- and third-generation Oakland trees, merely hundreds of years old, just as I wasn't taught that the redwood forests I grew up taking field trips to were home to the thousands-of-years-old Saklan Miwok people. ...These second- and third-generation trees are part of what is called a fairy ring. A fairy ring is the name for a group of redwoods that grows in an almost perfect circle around an old-growth redwood stump cut down by loggers. This is a survival technique that precludes the need for seeding the soil, new trees growing from the preexisting root system.
> ... The act of survival in any living thing is its center, no matter where it is pushed or pulled, no matter in how many years aged in lines of skin, wrinkles or folds, in rings you don't see until they are irrevocably severed.
> ("Trees of Mystery," 40-41)[a]

[a]Tommy Orange, "Trees of Mystery," *Orion Magazine*, Autumn 2021. https://orionmagazine.org/article/trees-of-mystery/.

Suzanne Simard is now a world-renowned forest scientist and author of the memoir *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (2021). Her newest book is *When the Forest Breathes: Renewal and Resilience in the Natural World* (2026). Simard is an expert on old growth forest known to the lay public interested in such things, not just scientists and climate activists. My first quotation from her is from the first paragraph in a scientific "letter" in which she was the lead author, "Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field," published with five other co-authors in the journal *Nature* in 1997:

> "Plants within communities can be interconnected and exchange resources through a common hyphal network, and form guilds based on their shared mycorrhizal associates. Consequently, the theory that plant community dynamics operate mainly within the constraints of resource supply should be reformulated to consider mutualism between plants and their mycorrhizal fungi, as well as microbially mediated resource sharing.

And here's an excerpt from an interview with Simard published in a popular magazine, 2021:

> "[P]eople are saying, "Oh, we're going to clear-cut these forests and plant a trillion trees, and that will increase our carbon sequestration capacity." In the meantime, we're cutting down these forests which are already storing *way* more carbon than these little plantations are going to be sequestering. And it's going to take those plantations decades and decades to catch up to what they were as old forests. So reforestation is a good idea, but only if we keep our old forests intact — keep the boreal intact, keep the Amazon intact, keep our rainforests intact. Because if we lose those, there is no amount of tree planting that is going to save us.[a]

[a]The first quotation is from p. 579 in Simard et al, "Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field," *Nature* 388 (7 August 1997): 579-82. Accessed 1 July 2021. For the second quotation, see Robert Moor, "Suzanne Simard Changed How the World Sees Trees." *New York Magazine* 6 May 2021. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/suzanne-simard-interview.html. Accessed 26 September 2021. Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest.* Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021. See also Wohlleben, Peter, et al. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*. David Suzuki Institute, 2016. Simard contributed to this collection.

The poet Craig Santos Perez, native Chamorro from Guahan (Guam), uses the banyan tree to signify both the connectedness of the Chamorro diaspora and how he hopes his book *Unincorporated Territory* (2008) will connect to a reader. Perez notes that his text is

> "composed of excerpts from seven different serial poems (totaling around 100 pages) that weave into each other. I based this design on the form of the trunkon nunu, or banyan tree, which grows on Guam. From the tree's branches, new root systems (known as "aerial prop roots") reach toward the ground, forming new trunks over time. I imagine each excerpted poem in this book as an "aerial root" grounded into the page and onto the reader's hand. In turn, I imagine each book-length excerpt as one possible trunk composed of braided, aerial roots. To connect the entirety of the project, many of the poems that appear in this first book will continue in subsequent collections.

> In the Chamorro belief system it's said that taotaomonas (the spirits of my ancestors) protect the trunkon nunu and live in the spaces that the roots create. This project hopes to create de-territorialized spaces for their spirits and my voice to dwell.[a]
>
> [a]National Book Critics Circle. "Conversations: Small Press Spotlight: Craig Santos Perez." September 13, 2008. https://www.bookcritics.org/2008/09/13/small-press-spotlight-craig-santos-perez/

It's good that contemporary ecological writing, both scientific and popular, stresses how understanding trees and forests leads to a deeper understanding of how healthy ecosystems sustain biodiversity. Simultaneously, however, we must also recognize that the principles of sustainability discovered recently by ecological scientists have long been exemplified by the practices of Indigenous nations. Native nations are *leaders* in using concepts of kinship and responsibility obligations to craft sustainable environmental solutions. They also have long modeled how to see trees and other living beings as kin, and as embodying ancestors to whom we need to listen. Many people who think of themselves as "modern" need to learn more from Native ways that are not just ancient, but also provide a sure path to a more sustainable future. That's why I cited above the *Status of the Tribes and Climate Change Report* from 2025. It's especially crucial to know these initiatives that are under threat in the midst of U.S. governmental decisions about environmental regulations that are basically demanding that over five decades or more of progress be erased.

Yes, we need to plant trees, geo-capture existent atmospheric carbon, and restore ecosystem health. Britain is a leader in the restorative agriculture movement, which not only has redefined what healthy soil is and how to maintain it, but is exploring how to raise both plant and animal food for people while cutting ties to fossil-fuel fertilizer and other practices associated with the industrial food system developed in the previous century.[7] We may probably before the twenty-first century is finished have to seed the atmosphere in ways that will reduce the greenhouse effect. And we'll need to redesign economics (including energy systems) to create jobs while supporting such efforts. But if humans in general ignore what Native nations are experimenting with now, we may as a species be done in by our racism, not just our ignorance or our fossil fuel fetish. All those addictions are actually intertwined.[8]

Some "green" or "sustainable" practices by governments and corporations in fact do harm to Native peoples, from ignoring their voices and experience when policies are decided, to actively displacing them in the name of preserving "wilderness." "Greenwashing" is indeed a poison. [9] Ecocriticism and ecological policies can't be sustainable if they don't acknowledge and try to rectify the damage that colonialism and capitalism have done and continue to do to ecosystems in the name of power and profit. But no green ecology can exist if it also doesn't learn from Native models of ecosystem management that benefit humans as well as ecosystems. There's also a global non-profit organization, The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), founded to give governments, companies, and forest managers guidance on proven sustainable practices for managing forests and timber harvesting; organizing against deforestation; and other practices. They also have established a reliable certification system for sustainable forest products. The FSC believes it's ethical to set up a market-based approach to promoting local and transnational sustainable forest policies.[10]

Perhaps the above examples may each act as an Archimedean fulcrum, helping us to leverage change. Their shared message is clear: we need science, policy papers, action plans, and both old and new poems and stories to learn from old forests and other biodiverse ecosystems as we shape our own and the planet's survival strategies. There is much interest in the Environmental Humanities in how best to re-forge the desire for multi-species connections in human consciousness and behavior. To list just some other influential examples beyond Simard and Kimmerer: Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008); Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016); Katie Holten's *The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape* (2023); and McIntyre-Mills, Janet J., and Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes' *From Polarisation to Multispecies Relationships: Re-Generation of the Commons in the Era of Mass Extinctions* (2021).[11]

True, some of our favorite human stories must be shelved or revised because they have a toxic misunderstanding of interdependency as a threat, or as something to be denigrated due to delusions about our human exceptionalism. But it's just as true that our species has created many other stories stressing inter-species affiliation, including some poems about trees. They bear truths their readers/hearers must viscerally experience. They *may* help their readers learn or re-learn what the Menominee, Maori, and Chamoro peoples know: trans-species encounters can be transformative for two-legged creatures, for the rest of the animal kingdom, and for plants and fungi too. Forests are laboratories as well as sacred spaces, and a lot more can be harvested or garnered from them than just boards made from that abundant biopolymer, tree cellulose. Forests are even good for *shinrin yoku*, forest bathing—a practice of using all the senses while being calm, quiet, observant, and meditative within the woods. It became popular in Japan in the 1980s and is now being adopted in many other countries. So too are urban micro-forests filled with paths and benches.[12]

[7]One good recent survey is by the British Ecological Society (2025). *Regenerative Agriculture in the UK: An Ecological Perspective*. London, UK. https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/our-policy-work/.

[8]What may be the most ancient, sustainably managed forest on Earth? (At least one for which we have records documenting the practices that kept the forest healthy even while it was being logged). A strong case can be made that it is the Menominee Forest in upper Wisconsin, which has been under the care of the Menominee since 1854. Displaced from many of their ancestral lands by the U.S. government and settler colonialism, the Menominee bargained to be able to retain this large aboriginal forest. They also decided not to clear it for agriculture; they farmed other land on their remaining territory. The tribe's name for themselves is "The Forest Keepers." Their stewardship of the forest meant—with only a few exceptions—harvesting only sick or dead trees, or naturally fallen ones. Pine and maple was sold to create everything from museum displays to basketball courts for the Olympics, and the high quality of the trees quickly drew top prices. So the forest wasn't protected from the market, but it was culled in a way that benefited both the tribe and the forest itself. After over 150 years and over two hundred million cubic feet of lumber pulled from the forest, it has more healthy trees than it did back in 1854. The Menominee understood the concept of a "mother tree" in a forest before Suzanne Simard and Western science did.

See Cara Buckley, "The Giving Forest." *The New York Times*, April 22, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/22/climate/menominee-forest-sustainable-earth-day.html, accessed April 24, 2023. As the article stresses, the forest and the tribe face many challenges at present, including the lack of young people will to take on the difficult and dangerous work of logging.

[9]For one discussion of greenwashing and Indigenous protest, see Jenni Monet on global Indigenous leaders' presentations at the annual UN forum on Indigenous issues. " 'Green Colonialism': Indigenous world leaders warn over West's climate strategy." *The Guardian*, April 23, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/23/un-indigenous-peoples-forum-climate-strategy-warning, accessed April 24, 2023.

[10]See the FSC website, http://fsc.org, and also this summary of their activities and ethics on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_Stewardship_Council. Accessed August 4, 2024.

[11]Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2017

Holten, Katie. *The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape*. Portland, OR: Tin House, 2024.

Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes' *From Polarisation to Multispecies Relationships: Re-Generation of the Commons in the Era of Mass Extinctions*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021.

[12]On forest bathing, see this LiveScience article dating from 2022: https://www.livescience.com/forest-bathing, accessed April 24, 2023.

Now to poetry. My tree-poems readings focus (mostly) on contemporary poems by living writers. They explore varieties of trans-species encounters, plus new forms of humility and ecstasy (out of the body encounters) that arise from those encounters. We need to sit under some deep-time trees again and let them cultivate us. *And* under the canopy spread by stories about trees. These poems let us do both.

Approximately a half decade after Robert Hass's poem "The Problem of Describing Trees" was published, another poem featuring aspens sprung up—as if from the same root system, but one that had migrated, we might say. This new poem was by a young poet, Dan Bellm. It's equally fascinated with the aspen and literary root systems, and its knowledge about aspens, plus its tone and rhetoric, clearly reflect tree scientists' understanding of aspen colonies and forest ecosystems after Hass' poem appeared. Bellm's "Aspens" is one of the standout poems in Fisher-Wirth's and Street's influential *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013). It differs from Hass' in two important ways: 1) it contains a much deeper analysis of literary precedent and how they are both relevant and outdated; and 2) its understanding about aspens has been transformed by advances in tree science.

For clarity's sake, I'll discuss the poem's interest in biological root systems first, then its figuration of literary roots. But it's worth noting at the outset that the poem has a lot of fun intertwining the two—thus supporting the thesis of my project here, that new understandings of nature provide impetus for new moves for poems to try out.

Bellm's poem recounts experiences that he and others had hiking in the Sierra Nevadas with a naturalist guide, trips that were part of a writer's retreat. What he learned transformed how he understood trees, and therefore also how he thought of how a forest could be used as an analogy for other kinds of beautiful but also strong and sustainable connection-networks. The experience was Bellm's own version of enlightenment under a tree's canopy, though that perhaps makes "Aspens" sound too grandiose; the poem's humor and irony make it anything but that. However, "Aspens" chronicles a very serious change in Bellm: unexpectedly, learning about aspens alters how Bellm understands literary tradition itself.

We could call this change a *radical* one, for it's inspired by aspen root networks, and the word *radical* is, literally, grounded in the Latin *radic-* and *radix*.

> "
>
> So the naturalist led us poets
> up a creekbed to show us a tiny portion of our own world:
> a fragile meetingpoint of volcanic rock & granite
> that over a hundred thousand years urged forth a way
> for water to wash down and make this canyon to the valley:
> told us that the grove of quaking aspens we stopped beside
> ought to call into question our definition of a tree:
> ...
> ... the system of roots beneath us
> was vaster than we could think, a million years old or so,
> and apparently so capable of continuing sending up clones each season
> that it can wait for the arrival of the next ice age to this valley
> if it takes another million years... (168)

The poet finds these vast geologic and biological timescales rather dizzying, but the trees help ground him. To cite a famous line from William Carlos Williams' "Spring and All," rooted down, he begins to awaken. I should add that this moment of the poem is not all high seriousness, as it would be in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Bellm makes fun of the poets and their notetaking, including his own. They're more comfortable in highly cultivated spaces such as arboretums, not this wild landscape. Satire is important for "Aspens" because it attacks how lyric poetry can feed humans' egocentrism; the entire goal of "Aspens" is to critique anthropomorphism, not reproduce it.

Which brings me to the topic of how "Aspens" uses aspen networks to reconceive poetic tradition. This is tricky to discuss because Bellm learns that, strictly speaking, an aspen grove is a single cloned organism. The ecosystem of lyric poetic tradition is anything but a series of clones. To resolve such a conundrum, Bellm twice embeds in his poem generous quotations from Keats' letters, both of which show Keats' efforts to craft a *choral* lyric voice that transcends (or at least checks) the self-centeredness of the conventional lyric's obsession with the first-person singular. Much as he admired Wordsworth, Keats' concept of the choral lyric was a pointed rebuke to Wordsworth's monologues and what Keats called his "Egotistical Sublime."

Bellm quotes Keats arguing that a poem is a "many-chambered" house, but then he drops that comparison to choose a *forest* analogy instead. Here's what Bellm does with the italicized incorporated material:

> "
>
> if you're lucky,
> you'll be a writer. Send down your taproot then, into the
> many-chambered whatever it is, the comfort and fright of it,
> that we're all connected. *And thus by every germ of Spirit*
> *sucking the Sap from mould ethereal every human might become great,*
> *and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furse and Briars*
> *with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become*
> *a grand democracy of Forest Trees.* These plant "communities"—
> manzanita, huckleberry, snow-something, oh I didn't write those down
> either I was so tired, the words are not the point—they're migrating
> over geological time—they send messages to each other
> across the great spongeous rootmass about changes in temp. and
> rainfall, outbreaks of blight, accumulated experience we'd call
> gossip or history, the sports and weather, film at 11—they slowly
> move, and so others move with them, what's the choice—the point
> is the interwoven indistinguishableness that all life feeds
> and is fed by, not the individual life. *Ecopoetry Anthology* 169-70

[13]

Despite the intentionally comic modern touches ("film at 11"), Bellm here aligns himself with Keats to critique poetry's romance with the idea that genius is autonomous and exceptional. Both instead hope for a career inspired by arguing with a diversity of others. Is Bellm idealistic here? Certainly. But no more so than—in fact, proudly in the tradition of—Keats' ideal of "a grand democracy of Forest Trees." Of course, Keats' dream of community was one thing; his reception by the arbiters of poetry during his lifetime was something else.

Bellm's "Aspens" is thus a vibrant hybrid: it's an ecopoem influenced by new science combined with an often comic narration of the human ego and its struggles. Against such a false "community," the aspens and their resilience stand as both a model and a reproach. Despite that, Bellm stubbornly deploys his new understanding of a Sierra ecosystem to reimagine the possibilities for a literary community—just as Keats did. His lyric's varied voices and moods braid together, making the poem choral or even antiphonal, part skeptical and satiric but frequently turning swiftly to seriousness and wonder. Its four pages of long-lined text aren't a stolid text block but a dramatization of thought and mood in motion.

[13]Keats quotation from Keats' letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, Feb. 19, 1818. *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*. Ed. Richard Monckton Milnes. New York: George P. Putnam, 1848. Transcription of this letter is also available online: https://www.spectacle.org/0613/keats.html. Bellm's poem "Aspens" is in Fisher-Wirth, Ann W., and Laura-Gray Street, eds. *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. Trinity University Press, 2013.

The entwined voices of "Aspens" demonstrate how contemporary ecopoetry revives itself by re-exploring its roots in Romanticism, while also intertwining those ancient continuities with a new understanding of the limitations of Romanticism, especially its myth of singular poetic genius. That critique of Romantic egoism was induced by the new realities pressing on the poetic imagination by the debacle of the Anthropocene, especially its knowledge of the damage that human arrogance has done. Contemporary ecopoetry aspires to the condition of what Keats called a "grand democracy." Ecopoetry's dreams and its praxis too strive to create a kinship network—Bellm's "spongeous rootmass"—linking human and more-than-human beings, both in our imaginative creations and in our lives.

Tim Seibles' more recent "Fearless" is also a poem about restless yearnings—or rather, the poet figuring his own via the unstoppable growing he finds in nature. "Fearless" grows from the good soil of Williams', Roethke's, Oliver's, and Hayden's work, as well as others'. It's also not too hard to think of "Fearless" as Seibles' response to the call put out by Langston Hughes in his poem "Earth Song": "I've been waiting long/ For an earth song."

Seibles is an expert at the meandering, quirky, often comic monologue delighting in digressions, sudden tone shifts, arcana, but also soaring flights. Jazz is certainly an influence here, as the title of one collection, *Buffalo Head Solos* (2004), reveals. But so is the stand-up comic monologue, not to mention the high drama of Spoken Word performance. The poems take great risks but are also frisky, questioning, and heroically persistent. They inspire us to go into dangerous emotional territory because somehow, riding his voice's verve, we will have the courage to match the challenges that come. Seibles won the Roethke prize for *Fast Animal* (2012), and there's a big bullish buffalo toughness in his work—counterbalanced by immense tenderness—that is not unlike Roethke's, both the man and his poetry.

"Fearless" is a refreshing ecopoem indeed. It's devastatingly funny about human stupidity—the many ways we weed and prune and try to stop greenery from growing. There's a sardonic Whitmanian catalog of gadgets and obsessions in the poem—shears and "kill-mowers," chemical warfare and the endless plucking and pulling of "weeds," all to enforce ideals of neatness and symmetry that have been instilled in our heads by *Better Homes and Gardens* and a thousand other poisonous scripts for what "beauty" should look like. (Needless to say, for a Black poet the idea of the "beautiful" is also a topic freighted with the history of prejudice).

To counter narrow notions of beauty or fecundity, the poem's often crooning and comic voice teaches us to appreciate nature's infinite persistence. Its speaker is a connoisseur of chaos, but without being so effete as Wallace Stevens was. The speaker could also be a father speaking to a young child; the poem is dedicated to "Moombi." The poet is a coaxer and an encourager, awed by the persistence of all growing things

> "
> The shoots rising in spite of every plot
> against them. Every chemical stupidity,
> every burned field, every better
> home & garden finally overrun
> by the green will, the green greenness
> of green things growing greener.
> The mad Earth publishing
> her many million murmuring
> unsaids.

The poem's fertile syntax sometimes shoots right across the poem's structural divisions, treating stanza breaks like a trellis, not a boundary to respect. Between each stanza is a tiny period, almost as if the poet has planted a seed. Seibles points out wonders and says, Look. And also encourages us to touch and smell. Alliteration and insistent rhythms celebrate nature's ongoingness, what Whitman called the "the procreant urge of the world," but slipping into Black English too just for the fun of it:

> "
> Good to see the green world
> undiscouraged, the green fire
> bounding back every spring, and beyond
> the tyranny of thumbs, the weeds
> and other co-conspiring green genes
> ganging up, breaking in,
> despite small shears and kill-mowers,
> ground gougers, seed-eaters.
> Here they come, sudden as graffiti
> .
> not there and then *there* —-
> naked, unhumble, unrequitedly green —-
> growing as if they would be trees
> on any unmanned patch of earth

In this kingdom of green, the kings of green are trees. The poet shows us that even small growing things have a tree-like grandeur about them if we just adjust our sense of scale and look at them up close. He traces the slow time of moss, "the shyest green citizen," slowing inching up an oak trunk. And he ends the poem by slowing down its momentum and quieting its orchestration to pause and take in majesty:

> "
> The trees – who
> are they? Their stillness, that
> long silence, the never
> running away.

It turns out that these soaring towers of green don't listen to our ideas of order. Like the rest of the green world, they give us other things we need: stillness, courage, resoluteness and rootedness. They also, as Whitman said poets must, remind us of "many long dumb voices," what is made mute because in our self-centeredness we have refused to hear it. Seibles' "Fearless" is a chant that will seduce us for a moment into forgetting the foreboding Anthropocene, even as it mocks our obsessive-compulsive activities that have caused our current troubles.

Six other recent poets in whose work trees figure significantly—August Kleinzahler, Alice Oswald, Jane Hirshfield, Forrest Gander (collaborating with Katie Holten), Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Linda Hogan—develop further this branching network meditation on tree poems. Each goes in its own individual directions, as poets will. Yet all share a trunk, so to speak, a nutrient-rich set of shared assumptions about how humans may be transformed by trees. I'm not talking about warming ourselves by firewood, using trees for lumber, or enjoying their cool shade and plentiful oxygen. I mean a different kind of value that can't be defined by normal economic or biological standards of

measurement—and indeed can't really be defined as a "use-value" for humans at all.

Key themes upcoming are these: the comic sublime of decentering humans; of how to experience nature's cycles interwoven within fossil-fuel infrastructure; how to wildcraft a "we" that includes more-than-human beings; and how contemporary ecopoetry, like Bellm's, uses ecological science's new discoveries to craft a new poetics.

The New Jersey Turnpike system proudly sports the Joyce Kilmer Rest Stop, named after a famous native son who wrote the much-loved sentimental postcard-poem "I think that I shall never see/ a poem as lovely as a tree." It's not likely Kleinzahler will get a rest stop named for him. But consider the virtues of his "Watching Dogwood Blossoms Fall in a Parking Lot Off Route 46" (1994), set in New Jersey in a different corner of its highway system:

> Dogwood blossoms drift down at evening
> as semis pound past Phoenix Seafood
> and the Savarin plant, west to the Turnpike,
> Paterson or hills beyond.
> The adulterated, pearly light and bleak perfume
> of benzene and exhaust
> make this solitary tree and the last of its bloom
> as stirring just now after another day
> at the hospital with Mother and the ashen old ladies
> lost to TV reruns flickering overhead
> as that shower of peach blossoms Tu Fu watched
> fall on the river bank
> from the shadows of the Jade Pavilion,
> while ghosts and the music
> of yellow orioles found out the seam of him
> and slowly cut along it.

"[I]f I stepped out of my body I would break/ Into blossom" (James Wright) this is not. Kleinzahler's is an "adulterated" sublime, surrounded by the motley music of America's hopes in decay as most of us are fixated on screens, not tree blossoms. The hospital prompts the devastating final trope, in which the poet feels his body being split open by beauty as if by a surgeon's scalpel. Or could it be that what is so wounding is the brute contrast between a dying world and nature's beauty calmly persisting? For even in the midst of North Jersey air, water, and sound pollution, orioles still arrive to feed off of the nectar and rain collected in tree blossoms, not minding that it's provided by a solitary dogwood tree surrounded by asphalt. Perhaps this briefly lasting dogwood beauty is a balm for pain and exhaustion, not its cause?

Kleinzahler's song doesn't resolve such questions, nor should it. It just sets them in circulation. It also changes our TV channel from reruns to a different kind of deep time, via its allusion to a famous poem written by Tu Fu well over one thousand years ago, in 761 CE. Usually translated as "Alone, Looking at Blossoms by the River," the poem can easily be found on the internet translated abominably, with lines like "The sorrow of riverside blossoms inexplicable" and "Among spring's vociferous glories, I too have my place." Far better is David Young's dignified understatement, which well captures how Tu Fu's melancholia and loneliness are heightened by memories of youth and nature's bounty: "you flowers, have pity/ on a white-haired man." "I don't walk, I stagger," he says, and then covers up his shame at old age's frailty with a boast: "spring knocks me out// two things I can still manage/ wine and poetry." Tu Fu, like Kleinzahler, notices orioles marauding tree blossoms, but by its end, surrounded by so much cascading life, the poet pleads for time to slow down: "I'll age more quickly/ when they're gone"; "little buds don't rush it/ open slowly!"[14]

If Kleinzahler's roadside dogwood reminds him of death's shears cutting the thread of life, "ghosts and the music" of Tu Fu's poem open up a life-line, a way to touch deep-time's presence even amid entropy. Kleinzahler's tree poem is a branching network sending out its tracers even while enmeshed within the U.S. highway system and its fossil-fuel residues. It offers seasonal cycles interwoven with cacophony and a life's arc's ending.

Alice Oswald followed up her magnificent book-length choral poem *Dart* (2002), in which she gives voices to a riverine ecosystem's many inhabitants, with the intentionally un-epic lyrics of *Woods etc.* (2004). I'll look briefly at the different human/nature networks she sketches in four representative poems: "Owl," the title poem, "Leaf," and "Wood Not Yet Out" (on pages 6-9, respectively). The anti-Romantic poem with "etc." in its title enacts human decentering via a series of startling tropes that imagine even a human's listening to the woods as a "wound" that causes a forest's rustling to cease. This is an ironic reversal of the poetics of Baudelaire's "Correspondences" or any Wordsworth poem. Oswald tries to chart the sun's path either toward or away from winter solstice negatively, by the Osiris- or Orpheus-like trope of a voice singing even as the body of the poet is dismembered: "hoping it [the sun] would rise/ suddenly from scattered parts of my body/ into the upturned apses of my eyes." "Owl" moves in the opposite direction. Hearing an owl call while the poet is in her lighted room transports her into dark woods. The moment also displaces human ways of knowing: "seeing my eyes seen,/ hearing my listening heard." "[A]n owl's elsewhere swelled and questioned," inspiring both "fear" and a stunning vision "straight through to God/ founded and fixed the wood," the poet suddenly transported back to the Creation and Genesis.

Oswald's "Leaf" and "Wood Not Yet Out" unveil similarly daring vistas of nature's powers that both rely on and confound Romantic tropes. The former plays with space, the genesis of a leaf; the latter with deep time, how to feel the future in the present. Reading "Leaf" (my favorite of this quartet), we journey inside a bud to see at microscopic scale a leaf in formation. Wood that may appear "dead" is full of life if you know how to look. Oswald's tone is hushed and attentive, reminding me a little of W. S. Merwin's signature voice, or Keats' "silence and slow time":

> the leaf that now lies being made
> in its shell of scale, the hush of things
> unseen inside, the heartbeat of dead wood.
> the slow through-flow that feeds
> a form curled under, hour by hour
> the thick reissuing starlike shapes
> of cells and pores and water-rods (8)

"Leaf" reverses anthropocentrism, treating the emerging photosynthesizing leaves as having "hands" and (pace Simard or Kimmerer)

[14]David Young, translator. Tu Fu's "Seven for the Flowers by the River," in *Du Fu: A Life in Poetry*. New York: Knopf, 2008. 137-39. Young treats the different stanzas as separate, numbered poems in a sequence, where each poem has 4 2-line stanzas. The poem is often known in English as a poem of seven quatrains called "Alone, Looking for Blossoms Along the River." August Kleinzahler, *Before Dawn on Bluff Road. Selected New Jersey Poems.* Rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. 49. [As indicated in the text, the poem dates from 1994.]

intelligence. The final two lines of "Leaf" imagine her poem's voice as a "provisional" and "inexplicable" compound of human and more-than-human, an "I/ in mid-air, meeting the wind and dancing." Agency is not centered in a human's will; it comes from elsewhere, the poet's ability to become and celebrate a *leaf* as a poet (a maker) too.

"Wood Not Yet Out" (set in late winter before leaves have fully emerged) also vivifies Spring's immanence, and it too speaks ironically of a human intruding into a forest ecosystem: "the rain, thinking I've gone, crackles the air/ and calls by name the leaves that aren't yet there." Marks of the human are there and not-there simultaneously. Those last two lines are a pentameter couplet, yet they describe an agency transcending the human. It's a profoundly Romantic moment about discovering "correspondences" or Wordsworthian tropes for infinite creative powers, while also marking the constant emergence of the more-than-human if we know how to listen or look for it.[15]

For Friedrich Schiller, Romantic nature poems reflected our alienation from and damage to nature via either elegy or satire. The poetic genre of the idyll, in contrast, exemplified no symptoms of a division between self and environment. Even the idea that we should build a home (*eco*, from *oikos*, home) in a poem suggests alienation and labor, a non-Edenic condition. Oswald's strategy is not incompatible with Schiller's poetics of feeling and re-connection (what he called "sentimental" poetry, with no negative connotation attached). Yet her project does not have the goal of making humans feel "at home." She wants her poetics to draw us out of our rooms and out of our normative ways of seeing, hearing, and knowing, until we reach moments of "seeing my eyes seen,/ hearing my listening heard." Or perhaps it's better to say that her project is to make us find a new home-away-from-home, in unpredictable discoveries of intelligences beyond our ken—"the slow through-flow" of other life energies. Like John Clare, perhaps the British Romantic Oswald is most deeply rooted in (though her upbringing was entirely different from his), she too uses her poetics to treat the tragicomic subject of how alienation from nature is an historically situated, socially constructed condition that may be outed by poems and challenged. That's certainly one of the goals of the epic *Dart* (about both riverine and human social networks) and the lyric collection *Woods etc.* with its sly, sardonic title.[16]

Jane Hirshfield's "Branch," from *Ledger* (2020), offers a different way to think about trees, branching networks, and space-time. It's composed very much like a set of Zen riddles or paradoxes, each set deliberately before us on the white field of the page. The poem doesn't have a "setting" or take place in a recognizably locatable landscape. But that is its austere strength. Or perhaps we should say that its world is that of meditative mind, immersed not in time's flow so much as out of it, looking down curiously on its stream-like motion. Compare Lyn Hejinian, from *My Life*: "It is hard to turn away from moving water."

"Branch" (49) is composed of five stanzas, all but the last a sentence that states a paradox on which we may meditate. The first one focuses on a round timepiece, not a branching network, but teaches us how to proceed through the poem:

> "A clock does not have hands, a face,
> tell anything rightly or wrongly, least of all time.

This statement outs the hidden tropes that infect "normal" language we use to describe our interactions with everyday objects or concepts. Such language, used without a second thought, encourages us to anthropomorphize the world, making it ours. This is not just true for English. In Spanish, revealingly perhaps, clocks "walk" rather than "run." The poem also implicitly asks us to imagine what kinds of time exist apart from clock-time. That question will motivate all the stanzas that follow.

The second and third stanzas spotlight the pathetic fallacy, our tendency to believe that nature reflects our own emotions or needs back at us, so that an empty branch "longs" for an absent bird, or that a bird's quick movement can be "read" as a punctuation mark that safely "holds separate the world's *Yes* from the world's *No*." Translated, that perhaps means nature's beauty affirms our desires rather than negates them? If so, Hirshfield's poem firmly negates that theorem.

The next stanza then swerves to a new query and a paradoxical response.

> "Is there anywhere on earth one branch that has never
> been perched on?
>
> That is not what branches exist for. Yet the birds come.

How a tree uses its branches is one thing, birds another. The poem's Zen terseness economically gives us a theorem that can apply to many other examples: Be skeptical of how expectations or norms blind us. See a tree branch (or any noun) with a focus on its *many* uses, and thus its different ways of being in the world. These are not to be synthesized, but rather to be kept separate. This poem enacts Zen reasoning, tricking us out of lazy thinking or connecting. But it's also in the tradition of skeptical nature poetry by Frost or Dickinson. If humans are to use trees and their branching networks to learn to model new forms of human selfhood as interconnected rather than autonomous, Hirshfield hints, we also need to corral our tendency to value only what we believe is useful to us. Like most of the poems in *Ledger*, this one wryly seeks to knock us off of our perch believing that the universe revolves around us.

Can a poem map a redwood forest ecosystem in western North America for us, by giving us a core sample of some of the many creatures living within its web? "Forest" by Forrest Gander and Katie Holten, in Holten's marvelous new anthology *The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape* (2023), does just that.[17] Two hundred and more feet in the air, a Steller's jay, a nesting murrelet, and a vole go about their business in the branches near the top of the towering tree, while down below, in the forest's understory, the poem reveals to us intertwined plant lives of whipplevine and sorrel and several kinds of fern, plus a squirrel that lives in the "fire caves" (protected spaces within the redwood's trunk bark) that also contains slugs and rooting mushrooms.

Interwoven with this mapping of ceaseless activity—even a slug's trails freshly glisten as we gaze at them—is a credo for understanding how any world outside of us is also a part of *our* story too. "*This is not*

[15]For a good reading of *Woods etc.*, see Stephens, J. "A world of sound and rhythm translating Alice Oswald's *Woods etc.*" *The Translator 28*.3 (2022): 295–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2021.2018260. Stephens focus on some translations of Oswald as well as the original poems. Her thesis: "Alice Oswald, who read Classics at Oxford, draws on the structures of orality found in epic poetry with an emphasis on sounds and rhythm to transcribe a powerful experiencing of the natural world."

[16]For superb discussions of Schiller and Clare, see Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), particularly his chapters "A Voice for Ariel" and "Nests, Shells, Landmarks." Bate's book was published just before Oswald made a name for herself as an essential contemporary English poet.

[17]Katie Holten, ed. *The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape*. Portland, OR: Tin House, 2023. "Forest" is on pp. 120-22.

description," a voice asserts, with the caesura indicating the power of a change of perspective; it is

> *an un-* *acknowledged chapter of our*
> *own memoir*—rich with chumbling volcanics,
> andesite mostly, and dacite, and rotting redwood needles that
> lightly tremble with nematodes and some
> spider-like arthropod who can name?

The human story receives a Copernican-like decentering here, so that we must learn to see ourselves as a transient in this ecosystem, not its center, much less its master exercising Genesis-like rights of "dominion." We may truly know and remember ourselves anew via this ecosystem only by recognizing our "*entanglement*," "*all instances interpenetrating*."

"Forest" also uses the fascinating word "*underwritten*" to describe the new human/forest bond the poem offers. The word has a primarily legal meaning today, connected to insurance contract guaranteeing payment for damage or loss, or a financial institution pledging to buy back unsold shares when new securities are issued. In the poem's hands, though, pledges, debts, losses, and even the concept of "securities" undergo a radical redefinition, from an economy of scarcity and danger to one of abundance. Its mapping of ecosystem interdependencies *underwrites* (gives us a script for) surviving and thriving.

It's at this precise moment of human humbling—yet also of discovering wonder and even hope—that the poem journeys into the forest's underground. In the quotation above, we encounter the geological and biological processes that create the nutrients and base that nourish everything above, with a brief reference too to the third kingdom—fungi—beyond the plant and animal networks. Vast hidden mycelial webs nourish this world and are part of its systems of nutrient exchange, decomposition, and composition. The archaic Britishism "chumbling," to nibble or chew, indicates how the whole system feeds on itself, renewing itself. And the poem even rethinks the slash marks (vergules) that are conventionally used to mark line-breaks in quoted poetry. Now they mark not slashes or breaks but the opposite: lines in a network connecting individual items to a larger whole.

As this essay nears its end, I turn for guidance to the lead poem in Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande* (2004), for it defines the methods and presents key themes for the rest of his book's 39-poem sequence. I'll honor next two tree poems of Linda Hogan's, "Lost in the Milky Way" (2016) and "The Age of Tree Rings" (2022). These poets center Indigenous ways of understanding (Chicano and Chickasaw) the messages trees give us—if only we would listen. Both also ground self-and-ecosystemic connections in the ability to sense the operation of time on more-than-human scales, what I've called the lyric poem's ability to evoke "deep time" as well as dramatic action occurring in a single, vividly rendered present.

Baca made a name for himself as a novelist and a nonfiction-writer as well as a poet. He's also an educator and an activist, particularly when it comes to projects opening poetry's powers to young people and adults, including the incarcerated. His commitment to poetry's transformative powers comes from his own hard experience: he was illiterate until age 21 and did not learn to read until he was incarcerated in a maximum-security prison for five years, much of it confined to solitary. During that time, Baca was taught to read, and reading alone for hours on end changed the direction of his life. Poetry and other sources also opened up to Baca perspectives on Native American history and cultures, and their influence on his poetry became more prominent as his poetry matured. Native spiritual practices and cosmogonies—along with those espoused by the poet and Catholic monk Thomas Merton—are especially evident in *Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande*. So too is his daily running for exercise, which Baca thinks of as another form of spiritual practice, flexing and cleansing mind and body at the same time.

The volume's opening poem, simply entitled "1.," shows why all the above elements are lifesaving for the poet. He runs and breathes, he says, to "shatter self-centeredness." A reader, at first glance, has a right to be skeptical of whether the poem's methods can achieve such a goal. The first-person pronoun *I* is used eighteen times in just the first poem, and many times thereafter. The poet's own actions and thoughts dominate throughout, and we're definitely in the familiar realm of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and other Transcendentalists who sought to access the sublime by passing *through* the ego and its sense-perceptions into something beyond both.

Laughter helps. So too does humility. Baca recounts his surprise "discovering/ the laughter that rises in my mistakes." That phrasing is fascinating. Laughter doesn't come from others and doesn't involve humiliation. Rather, it releases liberation; it rises from *within* him when he's able to laugh at himself. Similarly, Baca will use self-centeredness to undo itself, so that the "self" finds a different center, or rather a different energy-source, *outside* of where humans tend to locate it. Early on, the poem announces that goal first comically, then seriously. After having to leap off of his "bosque path" (*bosque* means *forest*) to avoid a speeding cyclist in an expensive Lycra kit, Baca realizes that disruption of his running routine has opened up a new "path" for him. He looks around "for signs to connect me/ to the navel of the universe" and finds one right away—in a tree-trunk knot. That knot's not just a knot, but a navel—the sign every form has of its umbilical link to another world. Then he spots another sign, in a spider's web, and yet another, via herons flying north and, through that migration, indicating winter has begun to wane.

Baca's poem turns a birder's factual observation into a spiritual practice—not just through prayer and a message the heron gives him, but also through the poet's own sudden insight into how his *body* has become like the bird's. His legs' tendons (a runner is very conscious about how well their legs are working) and the run itself become an offering to the Creator who made both bird and human. The writing of the poem affirms that gift:

> Create your own Spring season
> the herons tell me migrating north in the sky—
> I stop to watch them,
> asking my Creator for insight
> into their hearts, *let me be a blue heron*, I whisper,
> and for an instant
> each fine tendril of my feathered tendons
> is a shrine-offering to the light. (1)

This moment in the poem transforms the speaker's sense of self, body, and mind. He is "re-feathered" (perhaps suggesting he was once a bird and has rediscovered somatic memory of that earlier incarnation?). He has also now joined a "community" of many beings. He thinks like a plant and a tree too, attuned to "the up-suck energy in the roots/ the dirt-food, water-food, air-food." All of which "shatters" his earlier, stupidly myopic androcentric self-centeredness. Baca is channeling Gary Snyder a little here, enfolded with Thomas Merton, Whitman, and a host of other sages and predecessors. Perhaps also Quetzalcoatl,

the feathered serpent in Aztec legends who made the world and the boundary between earth and sky. Quetzalcoatl is also the patron for learning and all arts and crafts.

In this vision, even the seemingly empty spaces between branches have meaning, (perhaps like the empty spaces to be interpreted in Kabbalistic study?).[18] Baca's "self" is experienced as both fluid and infinitely interconnected to the lives of other beings, and such an insight is described as if silences or empty spaces are like *vowels* in a word or a sentence—as important to making meaning as the harder consonants:

> a blue space where there is nothing but the sound of silence
> harmonizing its beautiful vowels into my soul,
> pouring it in my veins,
> forcing me over the top of myself
> over the brim of my body
> into the air. (2)

Appropriately, Baca's poem ends with a prayer of thanksgiving to the gods of the Four Directions in which a tree roots Baca in a specific place and time while also honoring his sense of infinitely deep connections. The "great Bear" reference translates a Native name for the "Big Dipper" constellation, which points the way to the North star:

> I stop before a thick-trunked short-leaning close-to-the-ground tree
> to pray, a place I've made my shrine,
> and exhausted from the five mile run
> I bow to the east, asking the Light to guide me and illuminate my path,
> I turn south asking the Darkness to befriend me and teach me vigilance,
> I turn west to my ancestors, thank them for carrying messages to the Creator,
> then north, where I pray to the great Bear for healing and moral strength. (2-3)

The use of commas in this passage, as in Whitman's plenteous lists, creates a sense of a single flowing performance, not four separate prayers. Baca's poem is an example of the heightened consciousness of connection and healing that eco-philosopher Thomas Berry called the "Ecozoic" era for Earth's surviving species, including humankind—an era that Berry prayed would follow the disasters of the Anthropocene. Like Baca, Berry stressed that true ecological understanding had to include cosmological and spiritual energies. Berry also asserted that a spiritual conversion, not solely technology, will have to intervene if humanity is to make a successful swerve away from Anthropocene ecocide to a different way of living on this planet.[19]

Baca's prayer of thanks near the poem's end joyously reconnects the speaker to his ancestors and the whole universe. But this event occurs because of the agency of the humblest tree in the entire poem. It's "short-leaning" and "close-to-the-ground" (2), clearly a being that's had to fight to survive.

In science, dendrochronology is the art of telling time through interpreting tree rings.[20] Linda Hogan's "Lost in the Milky Way" (2016)[21] and "The Age of Tree Rings" (2022) use trees as a resource that can teach stubborn humans how to survive and heal a planetary apocalypse that we ourselves have set in motion. These poems define trees' use-value for us in startlingly non-materialist ways: their tree rings and branching networks are read as a spirit guide for our species' migrating soul. The older one speaks from a human perspective, filled with Native stories about the journey from this world to the afterlife. The Milky Way—the most vivid reminder we can see of what we now know is our planet's membership in a huge rotating galaxy—reminds us of prior souls and worlds:

> Some of us are like trees that grow with a spiral grain
> as if prepared for the path of the spirit's journey
> to the world of all souls.

The journey alluded to here, through the tentative invocation of "as if," does not just involve a soul's travels after death. It's also a journey we might undertake while living. How might our story be likened to the rings of a tree? Hogan imagines those not as concentric circles but as a *spiral*, taking us (if we open our minds to this possibility) to a deep-time epiphany—a revelation of how humans are connected to the infinite number of beings that came before us. The Milky Way—a spiral on a much grander scale—reveals that connection. If we know how to read it, we won't just get lost; we'll find ourselves anew.

"Lost in the Milky Way" also retells tales of creation, to give us a map for the future "like a great web of finery// some spider pulled from herself to help you recall your true following." This is a reference to Spider Woman, a creator figure and trickster featured in many Native stories.[22] An Old Woman also appears in the poem, who may be one of Spider Woman's many guises. She will aid us in recognizing our scars, and all those things wounded by our egotism, will, and blindness. She will help us leave those negative energies behind, after which the souls of the human dead will be freed to ascend to the heavens and an unknown future where being "lost" becomes another form of finding.

Hogan's more recent "Tree Rings" imagines a different future—not one elsewhere in the Milky Way or beyond, but here on Earth. Here Hogan's work harmonizes with Baca's, for her poem hints at what Thomas Berry has predicted with be the "Ecozoic" era of the Earth, after the collapse of fossil fuel growth-at-any-cost capitalism and the Anthropocene. Defining that era, Berry imagined that human activities would contribute harmoniously to the rhythms of ecological equipoise

[18]For instance, this passage by Robert Gamer from the Sefaria website, on written and hidden letters and meanings in the Torah: the space between black letters "refers to ideas that we bring into the text when we interact with it. This is called d'rash-interpretations, applications, and teachings that flow from the Torah. The d'rash are the messages we read between the lines." See also this page from the Kaballah Centre website, particularly the discussion of the letters *Yud* and *Vav*—letters in the Hebrew alphabet that are also used in various names for the Creator and so carry the Creator's energy. Baca may not have had Midrash in mind, but his poem certainly focuses on the contrast between literal appearances and hidden meanings, and the spiritual practice of devoting careful attention to both. In some writings, the letter Vav has a break or crack in it, whereas it should be written "whole," like this: ו. Here is the website's interpretation of the meaning of that break: "if our true intent is to create peace and harmony – with the entire universe, with the people in our life, our friends and enemies – then, in our mind we can take something broken and mend it. The crack in the letter *Vav* symbolizes the opportunity to heal that which is fragmented or damaged."

All this to me seems unintentionally relevant to Baca's own separate histories of brokenness and spiritual healing, including that exemplified by poem #1 in *Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande*. Here are the URLs for the two websites mentioned above: https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/239905.12. https://www.kabbalah.com/en/articles/secrets-of-healing-revealed/. Accessed August 25, 2022.

[19]See, for instance, Berry, Thomas. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. Columbia University Press, 2009.

[20]Sarah Kaplan, Bonnie Jo Mount, Emily Wright, and Frank Hulley-Jones, "Written in the Wood." The Washington Post, December 20, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/interactive/2023/global-heat-record-arizona-trees-rings/?itid=hp-top-table-main_p001_f005, accessed December 20, 2023. For a fine anthology mixing many different kinds of genres of writing about trees, I recommend Katie Holten's *The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape*. Portland, Oregon: Tin House, 2023.

[21]Linda Hogan, "Lost in the Milky Way," *Poetry Magazine*, March 2016. Available online: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/88744/lost-in-the-milky-way, accessed June 2026.

[22]For example, Susan Hazen-Hammond, *Spider Woman's Web: Traditional Native American Tales About Women's Power*. New York: Perigee Book, 1999. And Paula Gunn Allen, *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. Ballantine Books. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990.

and what he called "rejoining the Earth community."[23] About the future, Hogan too makes the gracious assumption that some humans will adapt and survive. Her persona as a tree gives us some advice about how to make that premise more likely. We must invent new/old forms of sociality and ways of conceiving kinship relations to the rest of the living world, what Donna Haraway in *Staying With the Trouble* calls sympoiesis, "making with," and the importance of "speculative fabulation." That shift begins with different stories about both our central strengths as a species and how our fates are intertwined with that of other beings, whom we must re-learn to view as kin. We need to listen to beings who *already* value multi-species networks and thrive within them.

Hogan's poem speaks in the voice of a soul that has been reincarnated many times, sometimes as human, other times as other beings. It's currently a tree and has some advice for us, using the rhetorical trick of a "reverse apostrophe," or prosopopoeia. Unlike in a conventional ode, when the poet addresses the subject of the ode (think of Keats' odes to a nightingale or a Grecian ode), in this exchange it's the poet who must listen. The androcentric structure of a conventional ode is undone. Further, in Hogan's poem about a soul's many reincarnations, that being's experience of many selves gives it a rather wry perspective on humans' tendency towards narcissism and naivete.

> "The last time I visited earth I wore a skin of human flesh, vulnerable
> skin covering that body on its way to letting go,
> bones broken like the left-behind umbrella in a branch storm,
> all having been such fragile holy ones.
>
> As a human, there was little left to hold solid, but this tree I have become
> is strong and bending, ring inside ring telling the truth of years of rain,
> times of drought, those of tribal burns.
>
> As a human I could not help my failures, my lacking, my broken heart.
> But aren't we all some part of a star torn loose from dark space?

Hogan's "tree" has other news for us too. It reminds us that originally, during *Homo sapiens*' emergence when we possessed the powers of fire, language, our sociability, and a certain prowess in making spear-points. But in general, we were a humbler species then, very aware of our precarity in the world. Our art showed it:

> "There was a time humans knew they were small and drew stick figures of
> themselves
> in ancient caves where animals were full and muscular beauty running powerful
> as the gods…."

If we can again make ourselves "small," the poem prophesies, a better future awaits us. Hogan writes of that possible future using the *present* tense, as if it's already coming into being. But of course the poet (and, hopefully, her readers) will understand that the poem is offering us an if/then hypothesis: *if* we change our behavior, then this future may come to pass. In the poem's concluding words, humans "begin to see the shining life around them, open minds to what had not yet been thought./ … /It is the time animals, birds, and trees awaited,/ even this tree I am that is not forever, simply one more moment in a living circle of mortal history."[24]

Decades ago, the poet Lyn Hejinian said that poetry's usefulness is that it crafts the language for and the consciousness of openness and inquiry. Her words remain relevant. The best poetry searches for immanence and seeks the conditions that encourage its unpredictable emergence:

> "[T]he emphasis in poetry is on the moving rather than on the places—poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that creates patterns of coherence. It is at points of linkage — in contexts of encounter, at what André Breton called *points sublimes*—that one discovers the reality of *being in time,* of *taking one's chance,* of *becoming another*[.] (*The Language of Inquiry* 3) [a]
>
> [a]Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

2 Conclusion:

> "[The sequoias in the Giant Forest in California] are the largest unlogged sequoia grove in the parks and one of the few groves where controlled burns have been held regularly since the 1980s. The resulting landscape—cathedral-like trees with almost no undergrowth—*is what all sequoia groves would have looked like before Native Americans, who had conducted prescribed burns, were forcibly removed from their lands in the late 1800s.*[a]
>
> [a]Mette Lampcov and Heather Smith, "Survivors: A Year in the Life of a Burning Forest." *Sierra Magazine* 107.2 (Summer 2022): 20-29. My italics.

Meditating on how to restore regenerative ecosystems that coexist with human thriving is precisely what the endings to Tolkien's epic and Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* explore. Before the War of the Ring and Sauron's defeat, Tolkien's Galadriel gives Samwise Gamgee a set of gifts in Book II, chapter 8 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. She says that—if he survives the coming war—they will aid him trying to rebuild the Shire. The gifts are held inside a box of plain grey wood with a rune on the top, a G for the gift-giver—but also, Galadriel says, "it may stand for garden in your tongue" (486). Inside the gift-box is earth from near the Golden Wood of Lothlórien, plus a seed of the *mallorn* tree. First, Sam and a gang of Hobbit helpers create a "large sheltered garden" as well as storage-spaces lined with brick (*Return of the King*, "Grey Havens," 373). After Sam worries that Galadriel would not want him solely to cultivate a single garden for himself, both Frodo and Merry encourage him to "use the gift to help your work and better it" (374). Working on his own, Sam repopulates the entire Shire with young trees, placing just a single grain of Lothlórien soil under each (following Frodo's advice). He and others also plant vines and orchards, and corn and barley. The single *mallorn* seed Sam buries in the Shire's communal area, the Party Field, where a huge tree had once been the focus and shelter for group celebrations. "Spring surpassed [Sam's] wildest hopes. His trees began to sprout and grow, as if time was in a hurry and wished to make one year do for twenty" (375). To honor Sam's work, his last name is changed to Gardner, and the new *mallorn* tree's health both signifies and *creates* the rejuvenation of the social world. The leaves, wood, and bark of the *mallorn* have special uses, including providing construction materials that, when properly harvested, cause no harm to the tree. In sum, Sam regenerates the burnt world described in "The Scouring of the Shire" by creating a *commons* for all Hobbits to use—shared wealth cultivated by wildcrafting, that is, regenerative practices in which it's impossible to draw a bright line between nature and culture.

[23]Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim. *Selected Writings on the Earth Community*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014. See especially chapters 3 and 8.

[24]Linda Hogan, "The Age of Tree Rings." *Orion Magazine*. Special Issue: Forty Origin Stories for the Anthropocene. Summer 2022. 13.

Another fascinating example of wildcrafting in Tolkien involves the "Mirror of Galadriel" chapter in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. When the trunk of a *mallorn* divides into a crown of many branches, the Galadhrim, the elven of Lothlórien, build a *telain* (a sort of platform) on top of the tree, plus buildings integrated into the spaces within the branches. An entire elven city thrives in the crown of a forest, so that separating what is "cultured" and what is "nature" is absurd. The antithesis of this elven *telain* is the Barad-dur, Saruman's Dark Tower, described as a "vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power" surrounded by wasteland (*The Two Towers*, "The Road to Isengard," 204). It collapses once the One Ring is destroyed.

Thus, it would be a mistake to read Tolkien's ending of the Ring saga as a rejection of advanced technological society in favor of pre-industrial pastoralism. True, Tolkien's parable shows the dangers of cultural narratives justifying "dominion" over other beings. Sauron's drive to enslave all living creatures, including Hobbits, is one with his treatment of all of nature as his to plunder. Ultimately, it's a death wish. In contrast, elven communities within the *mallorn* trees, with guard towers on the tree-tops—or Sam's mix of gardens, orchards, buildings, a central communal space and Party Tree, and woods—exemplify the possibilities of a sustainable nature-culture synthesis and symbiosis. Tolkien's hope created in the midst of the threat of Nazism proved a particularly inspiring dream for the world that emerged after the debacle of World War II.

Tolkien's Ents represent another instance of how he understood "nature" to be cultivated. But it's neither a garden nor an orchard like those that Sam and the other Hobbits recreate at the end of the war. It is wild, yet also Ent-made. We might call it *wildcrafted*. In Tolkien's world, trees and the beings that honor them are both transformed by their interactions: the Shepherds of the Trees evolve to resemble the particular trees that they guard, and the trees grow in new places because of the Ents' help. How thrilled Tolkien would be with recent scientific discoveries by Suzanne Simard and many others involving messages, nutrients and other things exchanged not just within one tree species network, but with many other beings above and below ground in a healthy forest.[25]

From one point of view, the Ents' existence violates the strict boundary between the animal and plant kingdoms central to the science of Tolkien's era. So too does Tom Bombadil, who is both plant-like and Hobbit-like. But that was Tolkien's point: he wanted his "fantasy" fiction to imagine beings transgressing the basic classifications of life used by early twentieth-century science. His vision also violated the unstated scientific rule of that era, which was never to assume that non-human species had "language" or intelligence. Tolkien's trees-with-language Ents have their own history of Entmoot councils, where the talk goes on forever due to the Ents' long-winded language. Yet the palaver isn't entless (the pun is irresistible); decisions are eventually reached through consensus. What Gandalf calls the new postwar age for Ents, Hobbits, and other beings models Tolkien's hope that more-than-human entities may come to possess legal rights within a world system of governance that encompasses *many* kinds of beings.[26]

The ending of Hayao Miyazaki's and Studio Ghibli's anime movie *Princess Mononoke* (1997) gives us another example of a possible healing synthesis—one that pointedly has not been fully realized at the end of the story, only just begun to be imagined. Miyazaki's ending, like Tolkien's, can easily be misread as advocating for nature, not civilization, or perhaps for ancient rural rather than modern industrial culture. After all, trees in an ancient forest, including the Japanese version of the cedar, centuries-old Cryptomeria japonica, are cut down to be made into charcoal for an ironworks controlled by an aristocrat, Lady Eboshi. The cedar forest that inspired the movie is on the island of Yakushima. "The oldest cedar there, 83 feet tall and nearly 54 feet in circumference, is believed to be more than 2,600 years old, making it one of the oldest trees on earth" (Mishan). Miyazaki has said the movie depicts "the forest that has existed within the hearts of Japanese from ancient times." The story is set in motion by a hunter's iron ball lodged inside a wild boar, causing it to seek revenge. The movie also suggests that, with the rise to dominance of modernity, any appreciation of the woods as sacred, populated by spirits, will inevitably erode. Ursula Heise asserts "the nature and intentions of the *Shishigami*, the elusive spirit of the forest who appears in a deer-like shape by day and in a gelatinous humanoid shape by night, are not understood by either animals or humans," with the implication that industrial civilization has changed both human and non-human worlds.[27]

However, recent readings of the film's conclusion by Melanie Chan, Nathalie op de Beeck, Tracey Daniels-Lerberg, and Matthew Lerberg argue that *Princess Mononoke* offers a possible yet precarious vision of interdependence. Lady Eboshi concludes that "the wolves and the crazy little wolf girl helped save us all . . . we're going to start all over again. This time we will build a better town." As Daniels-Lerberg and Lerberg note, "Although 'start again' indicates a potential repetition, … Lady Eboshi's surprise that her adversaries saved her[,] alongside her statement about 'a better town'[,] implies a potential change in her approach." Further,

> "if Lady Eboshi eventually strays, returning to her adversarial view of nature, Ashitaka [the movie's main human hero] remains behind to remind all who will listen that the great forest spirit is 'life itself, he's not dead . . . he's here right now trying to tell us something, that it's time for both of us [Ashitaka and San] to live." What Ashitaka gleans from the return of the green mountainside and abatement of violence reflects Nathalie op de Beeck's statement that "in Miyazaki's *animé*, as in the actual world, nature is not distant but coexists within civilization (and vice versa). Humans and wild animals have no choice but to share their territory; the boundaries overlap and bleed into one another. Nature and civilization are interdependent."[28]

[25]For the Ents and Entwives, see *The Two Towers*, III-IV ("Treebeard") and *Return of the King*, V.6 ("Many Partings"), pp. 317-21. As emphasized in "Treebeard," Entwives favor not deep woods but fields and streams nearby, and gardens; in short, "order, and plenty, and peace" (*Towers* 99). It's yet another instance of Tolkien imagining communities that *balance* domesticated gardens with wildcrafting biospheres that serve the inhabitants but have their wildness and otherness protected; they are not just treated as "resources" to use. At the *Rings*'s end, the Entwives have still not yet reunited with the Ents (*Towers* 100; *Return* 321). The race will be offspring-less until they do.

[26]For more on Ents, see also Tolkien's hilarious notes on their wild language (*Return*, Appendix F, Ents section [510]); plus Robert Foster's *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth*, the Ents entry. New York: Ballantine, 1978. My thanks to a colleague and Tolkien expert, Craig Williamson, for help with this section; any errors that remain are unfortunately of my own planting.

[27]Ursula Heise, "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film," *Public Culture* (2014) 26.2, 309. Both the Miyazaki quotation and facts about the island of Yakushima that inspired his movie are from Ligaya Mishan, "Hayao Miyazaki Prepares to Cast One Last Spell." *The New York Times Style Magazine*, Nov. 23, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/t-magazine/hayao-miyazaki-studio-ghibli.html, accessed Nov. 26, 2021.

[28]Nathalie op de Beeck, "Anima and Animé: Environmental Perspectives and New Frontiers in *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*," in Mark I. West, ed., *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 267. See also Melanie Chan, "Environmentalism and the Animated Landscape in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997)," in Chris Pallant, ed., *Animated Landscapes: History, Form and Function* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 99; and Daniels-Lerberg, Tracey, and Matthew Lerberg, "To 'See with Eyes Unclouded by Hate': Princess Mononoke and the Quest for Environmental Balance," in Denison, Rayna, ed., *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2018, pp. 57-73 (specifically 70-71). Print.

They conclude by citing Donna Haraway. The new ecocriticism seeks out speculative visions in the visual arts and literature—including most of the poems discussed in this essay—that reject primitivism/modernity and rural/urban binary choices. Instead, these works imagine either/or struggles for dominance replaced by a future kinship network among many kinds of beings, sometimes combative, sometimes in harmony:

> “As Haraway argues they are ‘together in situated histories, situated naturecultures, in which all the actors become who they are in the dance of relating, not from scratch, not ex nihilo, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to this encounter…’ ” (*Haraway Reader*, 25; Daniels-Lerberg and Lerberg, 71)

It’s no accident that in over 4,000 years, from *Gilgamesh* read on earthen and lapis lazuli tablets or paper (or heard sung aloud) to Miyazaki films streamed via digital tablets, works of art have gazed on deforestation and then reasserted the importance of understanding that human beings’ fate is entwined with the fate of ecosystems, including forests, that we lust to consume. These storytellers see restoring our wonder at enmeshed mutuality as precarious, precious, and always in need of repair. Reforestation, not genetically altered trees growing in plantations for harvest. Some of the new “wild” can be cultivated: it’s *wildcrafted* by humans working in conjunction with nature. There are cacao tree farming practices (to produce chocolate) that exemplify contemporary regenerative agricultural principles. The trees are not grown as plantation-style monoculture, but are mixed with other trees in a forest—banana trees, native shade trees, timber trees. The cacao trees are healthy and produce abundant harvests; the soil is much more fertile, rich with microorganisms—not to mention drought resistant. A biodiverse forest agro-ecosystem is more resilient against stresses—as well as also absorbing carbon efficiently. It also can provide stable income for the farmers who tend it, and less need for fertilizer.[29]

We need science to help us understand how forests have transformed our planet and can help heal it now. We also need poets to aid us to think like a forest and to trace its correspondences.

The quotation from Donna Haraway is from her “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” essay in Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 25.

[29]On cacao, see the *To-ak Journal* website. https://toakchocolate.com/blogs/news/what-is-regenerative-cacao. Accessed June 23, 2022. On regenerative agriculture more broadly considered, see footnotes 7 - 11 above.