

How like a (Fig) Leaf

How unlike a book title. How unrecognizable in the humanities (Donna Haraway's book-length interview *How like a leaf* was published in 2000). The initial invocation of metaphor only grants initial comfort – how *like*. We are uncertain of the subject of the comparison. Is Haraway herself 'like a leaf'? Is the interview form, is the printed page? What could such an open-ended comparison convey? I'm beginning here because this figure from this thinker, one with a PhD in Biology, inspires me regarding possible paths of thought that may well generate differences but do not police an absolute divide between the humanities and the sciences, as much as my training in the former renders these paths hard graft. It also speaks to Haraway's refusal to endorse what she names a Western ethnocentric mode of thought that would separate nature from culture, *as if that were possible*. On the side of curiosity and on the side of play, she entreats us to view:

<SLIDE>

'Biology [as] an inexhaustible source of troping. It is certainly full of metaphor, but it is more than metaphor... biology is not merely a metaphor that illuminates something else, but an inexhaustible source of getting at the non-literalness of the world.'¹

Her repeated use of 'inexhaustible' suggests the fallibility of taxonomies of speciated difference as it is classically thought, and speaks to a reciprocity with what Jacques Derrida calls limitrophy, or an understanding of *difference as that which grows*. Growth, cultivation, and the work of figuration: there is a graft here, for me, between the work of Haraway and Derrida and also between academic attention and

horticultural practice. Haraway explicitly cautions us against the invocation of gardens. Gardens, she notes, tend to revert to *the* Garden, recalling Nature to a state of innocence and the requirement that *she* must be saved, fenced off, guarded, or is already guarded, fenced off or saved by an impenetrable veil or symbolic bar.² Countering the metaphysics of Nature as guarded Garden, Haraway insists on a creative interleaving of *tropos* and *topos*, figure and place. This is a *geotropism*, she says, muddying the dominant figure in the history of rhetoric that is the sun and its supposedly all-pervasive command of a *heliotropology*. This geotropism is a general condition, not one into which we have Fallen nor one from which we must or could transcend.

Oversight

Haraway's regular enthusiasm for the mud, and for our always non-innocent entanglements with the world notwithstanding, this symposium continues to cultivate attention towards a problem recently diagnosed by James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler as *Plant Blindness* – that is to say that humans tend towards noticing what is within 0 and 15% below their field of vision.³ So much for the overblown register of vision in so very many narratives of the human. Narratives accounting for the evolution of Homo Sapiens and the individual subject formation of human beings are famously magnetized by visual figures. To index but two examples: in the wider species case, Freud accounts for the emergence of human bipedalism as intrinsically bound up with the privilege of sight, notably over and above smell with its fecund fascination with our animal organs of excretion and reproduction. In the narrower case, Lacan sketched a mirror phase that would provide a visual anchor, a bounded

self-image, for the sensations otherwise exceeding what would become the human subject. In psychoanalytic accounts, however, the field of vision is neither all-seeing nor circumscribed technically by a few degrees, rather it is psychically filtered by projection, foreclosure, displacement and other defensive mechanisms to avoiding seeing the difference of the sexual other. I name these old problems, that persistently live on, because they may yet be part of the same story, even though they do not appear to address the vegetal, at least at first blush.

<SLIDE>

Something of the unease that Derrida felt before his cat, one morning, in that infamous bathroom scene, afflicts me now, navigating a space and a time that is shot through with histories that seek to determine and wholly delimit such encounters. But the elemental academic frameworks of discipline, method, archive, subjects and objects are suffering a dehiscence, at least they are if we are to take deconstruction seriously. The invitation to speak to the topic of *Plant Blindness* appealed to the poetic graft of the pleasure of cultivating new thought, alongside a certain concern regarding what might come to light in the autobiography or autopsychobiography or autobotanicography of what is parsed through the practice of gardening in my life. In the sudden and recent proliferation of humanities scholars turning their attention to the vegetal, Derrida is frequently invoked. This is for several reasons. One is simply in acknowledgement of the profound energy that his posthumous book, *The Animal that Therefore I am* has catalyzed in what is called, for want of a better name, Animal Studies. There is, perhaps, a kind of wish for the same kind of boost to the growth of 'Plant Studies' (which again I am naming only provisionally). Sometimes this manifests as a rebuke to Derrida for putting off plants in the second volume of his seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Jeffrey Nealon's *Plant Theory* quotes him

to that effect) sometimes it shows up as a hermeneutic device to explore the question of what might have happened had the encounter between Derrida and his cat, concerned the possibility of a vegetal rather than feline ‘primary mirror’ (Giovanni Aloï). Part of the path that I am setting out upon here will also involve another return to this book in light of the wider project of deconstruction. While it remains the case that many Animal Studies scholars are producing illuminating work that may well concentrate on particular animals or focus on particular cases of injustice against particular animals, the decisive contribution of Derrida dilates around his insight that

The “question of animality” is not one question among others [...] it also represents the limit upon which all the great questions are formed and determined, [...] all the concepts that attempt to delimit what is “proper to man,” the essence and future of humanity, ethics, politics, law, “human rights,” “crimes against humanity,” “genocide,” etc.⁴

This does not mean that animals are the most important beings to consider: Derrida’s work is not a politics of representation nor one of equality or symmetry that would aim at adequately accommodating all living beings in the picture (with each in their rightful place). Rather, it is to interrogate the way that the pernicious *concept* of the animal as supposedly discrete from the human divides up life, up to and including who may be put to death. ‘The concept’ here indexes the Western metaphysical imaginary in general, but the specular dialectical tradition that raises man above nature in particular and substantially contributes to the concept of the subject before the law. The laws formed by that imaginary barely consider vegetal lives as such at all (and where they do it tends to fall under localized property law): it is indigenous and

other eco-activists that are insisting that law should imagine natural environments, rivers say, *as* persons with rights rather than belonging to persons or nations with rights, or that ecocide should be legally established as a criminal, thus punishable, offence, my path today will not consist of adding plants in to existing juridical structures (as urgent as that is, given the ‘catastrofuck’ of continued climate change denial). If there is a ‘plant question’ it will be extensive and it will continue the work of ‘soliciting’ the concepts on which we have relied, consciously or unconsciously (soliciting in the sense that Derrida etymologically unpacks, as a shaking to the core).⁵

As with so very many other readers of *The Animal that Therefore I am*, that bathroom scene has caught my attention. This is not just because of the novelty of the philosopher and a cat, nor just that philosophy and the everyday coincide in a scene in order to speak critically of subjectivity in light of our shameful conceptual inheritance that bars the homogenized mass of non-human animals from all the powers believed to be possessed by the subject that calls himself ‘Man’. But, magnified in the context of this symposium, it is the way that nudity, or its constitutive impossibility, is disseminated across the whole essay from the desire conditionally expressed in the opening sentence, namely that Derrida ‘would like to entrust’ himself before his audience with ‘naked words’.

<SLIDE>

Breaking that opening sentence is the easy to overlook clause: ‘were it possible’. Following the traces of Derrida’s marked use of the conditional – *I would, were it possible* - allows his cultivation of difference vis-à-vis our violent conceptual heritage to take root. This fragile guide is especially necessary given his unorthodox presentation of ‘argument,’ which is achieved as much at the level of style as it is by

more evident exegesis. It can also ameliorate the difficulty for readers in recognising the shared ground between the more obvious dogma maintained by the concept of ‘the animal’ (such as ‘the animal cannot mourn’) and what may initially appear descriptive – ‘the animal is not nude’. <SLIDE>

Thus, when all the supposed capacities belonging to man are put into question – and Derrida names ‘speech or reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, etc’ - they are specifically put into question in so far as they are identified with autonomous capacity.⁶ Hence, Man’s professed ability to speak, etc, versus the animal’s alleged privation of speech. The *ability* to dress oneself, the *ability* to be nude (assuming a self-consciousness, an embarrassment and a shame), are thus roped into conceptual coincidence with the autonomous ambition of Man, but no matter how counter-intuitively Derrida implies something very different. I’ll come to his implications, which regard the living in general, not just Man and not just nonhuman animals, in a few moments.

<SLIDE>

While most of the vast amount of critical writing on Derrida’s encounter with his cat has focused on his endorsement of the notion that an animal might gaze back at or respond to a human, one portentous aspect – briefly addressed as such in the essay – has garnered comparatively little interest. Drawing on his unease, his shame before his cat, Derrida remarks that ‘We would [...] have to think shame and technology together, as the same ‘subject’.’⁷ Yes, there is another ‘would’. It is planted in a garden, the Garden. Starting with an ‘In the beginning’ and desiring naked words, the ludicrously time-travelling answer that Derrida’s text gives to the question of *how far can one plant take you* is to the origin of time. This is not to summon Stephen Hawking. Rather, it is to indict the Judaeo-Christian onto-theological story of history.

It is to disperse the origin tale that Genesis consecrates, implanting sin within autobiography and positioning vegetation as to be appropriated in the single gesture of seeking cover behind the leaves of a Fig, a story doubled by Freud when he positions woman's sole invention as that of weaving cloth in memory of the cover up performed by her own 'bush'.

Yet even a sophisticated thinker, and indeed the translator of *The Animal that Therefore I am*, David Wills, hedges his bets when writing of the seizure of the fig leaf as an affirmation that shame and technology are as one, a 'blushing machine' as he says.⁸ He is certainly aware that this seizure, this sublation, this overcoming of nature in order to forge clothing, with clothing then standing for Man's technological grasp upon the world, is that of dialectics (an idealist discourse that Derrida condemns as inadequate in itself and continuing to license an ethical horror show of ever-greater proportions). But in expanding 'shame and technology' to include at least some nonhuman animals (those that mate) Wills drops critical attention to both sexual difference and the Garden in which shame and technology are ostensibly bedded. He lets fall the nuance that Derrida's conditional 'woulds' have nurtured regarding the muddying of the naked truth and the scattering of any notion of an original sin.

Out of the seeming obviousness of clothing as a distinctively human technology motivated by the dialectical overcoming of weakness [the weakness of nudity welded to sin] – versus the seeming obviousness of the absence of clothing as such on other species authorized by their alleged perfect adaptation to an allegedly ahistorical nature, Derrida refashions the stakes. 'Clothing' becomes a particular instance of a wider condition. This wider condition is that of hiding.⁹ Hiding is a general condition,

clothing and shame become demoted to particular instances. And even that gesture of withdrawal – hiding- can never be complete: this is not an alternative between absence *or* presence. We are none of us revealed in the naked truth of presence, none of ‘us’ at all. There is no reason to think that once the conceptual divide between ‘man’ and ‘the animal’ is dismantled, the onto-theological Garden dug over, and the differences between living things welcomed as a site of growth that this would not also affect vegetal lives. Vegetal lives - and not just the Fig Tree that a certain guerrilla gardener hid amongst less showy shrubs in urban South London - are also partly revealed, partly concealed, never fully present. While it is the case that Derrida does not devote such lengthy attention to plants as he does to animals, his earliest writings radically extend ‘auto-affection’ as an inherently open structure of relation to self to ‘[a]ll living things’ [the auto- is really a hetero-].¹⁰ To expose at least something of both Derrida’s possible vegetal encounters and the ways in which sexual differences might also be cultivated rather than shamed, I will turn briefly to Michael Marder, Elaine Miller and Luce Irigaray.

<SLIDE>

Tree surgery

Marder reconstructs a scene of reflection with regard to vegetation in the second book of his recent plant trilogy, *The Philosopher’s Plant*.¹¹ The book’s twelve seductive chapters each explore a philosopher and ‘their’ plant. Yet in his zeal to propagate plants within our philosophical and ethical attention, even Marder can under-investigate the figures he suggests have escaped attention hitherto. In the case of ‘Derrida’s Sunflowers,’ Marder prefaces his discussion with Derrida’s reminiscences

of his early life in Algeria. In the book of 'Plato's Plane Tree,' 'Irigaray's Waterlily' and 'Derrida's Sunflowers', Marder remains oddly uninterested in Jean Paul Sartre's Chestnut Tree. For the teenage Derrida, Marder notes, allowed himself to pause from reading the novel in his hands to be luxuriantly caught up in the 'lush vegetation' that surrounds him in La Ferrière Square.¹² Emphasising that this reading scene is 'full of mirrors' between times, places and modes of philosophy, Marder tells us that the novel dilating Derrida's attention was Sartre's *Nausea*, yet he disregards the vegetal encounter marking that very text (an encounter that critics refer to as a metonymy for the entire novel).¹³ That encounter, even as it spurred the disorienting *Nausea* of the novel's title, is blindsided. The distance that Algeria's vegetation implants in Derrida, and the difference in affect gleaned from his text, becomes all the more mysterious since it is denuded of all contrast with Sartre's disturbance by the chestnut tree. Marder instead truncates Derrida's contemplation for a generalized and rather formalized figure of *differance* (acting as the pretext for his misguided accusation that Derrida is only interested in the 'flowers of rhetoric').

Can it simply be that verdant surroundings dispel readerly concentration? Of course they can. In the spirit of mirroring Derrida and Sartre, Marder tells us that the latter also 'looks up to plants', but he prunes out the sickness, the existential nausea in this literary archive prompted by the very roots of what Randy Laist refers to as 'the most famous tree in all existential philosophy' - Sartre's Chestnut.¹⁴

<SLIDE>

It's fame is such that a Chestnut tree graces the cover of a recent collection of criticism - *Sartre's Nausea: text, context intertext* - even as its mere 5 references to the tree all orient it as the metonymy of the experience of nausea before a meaningless

world. Laist, writing in the context of ‘plant horror narratives’, claims *Nausea* as exactly that, suggesting that the pernicious presence of this Chestnut tree ranged beyond existentialism as such and contributed to the creeping vegetal horror expressed in such films as the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956] and *The Day of the Triffids* [1962].

Brief though Derrida’s recollection of vegetation may be within his essay concerning the journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, associated with Sartre, it neither devolves into a generic idea of difference nor does the recollection propagate any negative affect. Naming the roots is a citation, naming the possibility of the world as ‘too much’ is a citation, or a graft of Sartre’s existential horror in a Parisian park into what was then French Algeria. Transplanting them, Derrida wonders how he will and *will not* write like that, the transplantation does not clone. Given that Sartre’s anti-hero, Roquentin, is overwhelmed by the tree roots, become ‘monstrous lumps’ that are finally described as ‘naked, with a frightful and obscene nakedness,’ and altogether ‘too much,’ perhaps Derrida’s scene with the little cat is a lesson in how not to write like Sartre. While Derrida’s unease before his cat dismantles the conceptual inheritance that would keep the feline forever the same, closed within its category, supine before the erect human, the experience does not flatline into equivalence or meaninglessness or boredom as it does for Roquentin, even when the garden ‘smiles’ at him.¹⁵

How like a flower

<SLIDE>

There are only scattered references to plants in the work of Luce Irigaray. However, with the encouragement of Marder and, importantly, the work of Elaine Miller in

foregrounding ‘*efflorescence*’ in Irigaray, insight into vegetal being may yet be gleaned. Given Irigaray’s style, which often invokes Western philosophical traditions only to give quite other emphases to their key terms, a ‘method’ that puts her close to Derrida, this is not surprising. While vegetal figures crop up affirmatively and processually across Derrida’s work, the grafting of contexts, the dehiscence of concepts and the dissemination of any seed, while Derrida insists affirmatively that sexual and animal differences traverse the same horizon, it is Irigaray that explicitly doubles back to the identification of women with plants, as it is dug in by philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel. Joined under the concept ‘passivity,’ this union classically serves as the dumping ground for the negatives, all the privations that the subject that calls himself man fears to find in himself. Irigaray does not counter this history by arguing for equality through claiming that women too must uproot from the imagined stasis of natural origins and pull themselves erect into fellow dynamic political actors. Rather,

Her so-called passivity would not [...] be part of an active/passive pair of opposites but would signify a different economy, a different relation to nature [...] A matter, therefore, not of pure receptivity but of a movement of growth that never estranges itself from corporeal existence in a natural milieu.¹⁶

Irigaray thus works to transmute feminine sexual difference with the vegetal such that there would be overlap between, say the auto-affective gesture of at least two lips in contact blurring inside and outside, blurring visible and invisible, sight and touch, conceptual and sensible, with the auto-affective gesture of, say, tulips, blurring sight

and touch, conceptual and sensible, vegetation and the flesh as well as – to pressure Irigaray – masculine and feminine.¹⁷

Rather than an agony of shame in the grip of an onto-theological concept, an opening emerges that cultivates sexual differences that are neither anthropocentric nor zoo-centric nor phyto-centric, neither wholly clothed in metaphor, nor wholly revealed in their naked truth.¹⁸

¹ Donna J. Haraway, *How like a leaf*, 2000, 82

² See Donna J. Haraway, 'Otherworldly Conversations'

³ <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/53/10/926/254897>

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Violence Against Animals' in Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 62-3.

⁵ See Derrida, 'Force and Signification' in *Writing and Difference*

⁶ Derrida, *The Animal*, 5.

⁷ Derrida, *The Animal*, 5.

⁸ See David Wills, 'The Blushing Machine' in *Parrhesia*. I thank Astrid Schrader for valuable feminist conversations on our reading of Derrida and Wills.

⁹ See Derrida, *the Animal*, 61.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 165.

¹¹ Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant*, Columbia UP, 2014.

¹² Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant*, 194

¹³ See Alistair Rolls and Elizabeth Rehniewski cited in *Plant Horror*, Palgrave, 2017, 164.

¹⁴ Randy Laist, 'Sartre and the Roots of Plant Horror' in *Plant Horror*, 164.

¹⁵ 'Once at the gate I turned back. Then the [garden smiled](#) at me. I leaned against the gate and watched for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the laurel, meant something; that was the real secret of existence [...] I felt with boredom that I had no way of understanding.' Sartre, qtd in Laist, 176.

¹⁶ Irigaray, qtd in Miller, 190.

¹⁷ Mapplethorpe as stand-in for Genet for me? Fucking *Glas!* *Antho-morphism?*

¹⁸ Sexual differences? Because auto-affection renders a form of 'sexuality' regardless of a/sexual reproduction?