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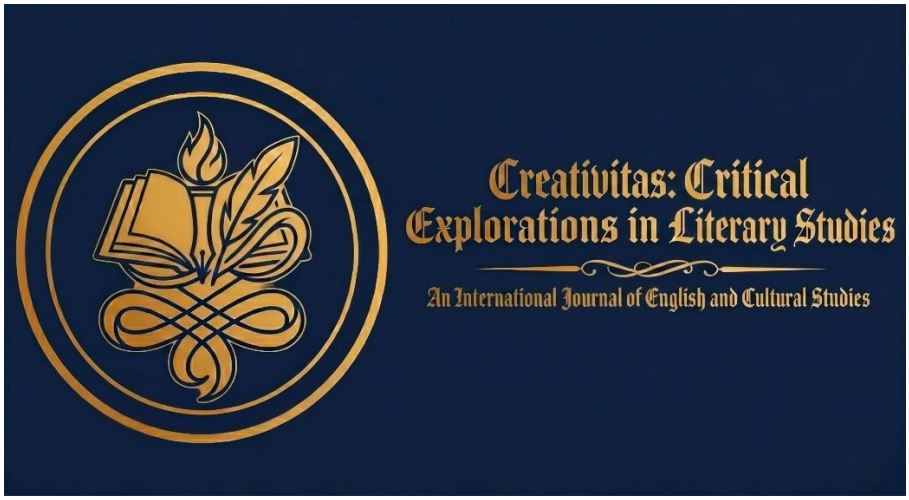
Plant Humanities

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EDITORIAL

Listening to Plants

Volume 3, Issue 1 of *Creativitas* takes plants as its subject. We chose Plant Humanities as the theme because it could hold almost everything a literary journal publishes: poems, novels, plays, myth, ritual, memoir. Plants turn up in all of those, usually in the background, and we wanted to see what would happen if the background were allowed to speak. What we did not expect was how many contributors would end on the same verb, *listen*. The word appears in the conclusions of writers who have never met and who work on different centuries, languages and continents. We took it for a coincidence at first. Reading the papers one after another, we stopped thinking so, and by the end we read it as the real subject of the issue.

The theme asks something specific of literary scholars. Our habit is to read a tree in a poem as a symbol or a setting, and then to move on to what it means for the people. Several authors call this habit plant blindness, a term the biology educators James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler introduced in 1999,[1] and they set out to break it. Sumana Sardar finds that critics have treated Mahasweta Devi's forest as scenery. Anindita Basak argues that Bengali verse has long resisted that treatment. Tess Ezzy, and Shristi Mehta and Archana Jaiswal, draw on Michael Marder's plant-thinking[2] to ask what changes if the plant is allowed to be the one acting. The papers do not agree on how far that move can go, and we have not tried to harmonise them. A field this young has not settled what a reader owes to a plant, and we thought it better to print the disagreement than to hide it.

The issue carries ten articles and two book reviews. The authors write from Texas and Florida, from the University of New England in Australia, and from universities in Delhi, Patna, Kolkata, Nagaland and Himachal Pradesh. One is a professor emeritus, one is an undergraduate at Jadavpur University, and several are doctoral researchers. We did not plan that spread. Every submission went through the same double-blind review, and the mix of people who passed it suits a field that is still deciding what counts as evidence. Below we have

[1]James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, "Preventing Plant Blindness," *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82–86.

[2]Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

grouped the papers by what they share, which is not always the order in which they appear in print.

Robert Morrison Randolph's "Walking Under Trees" opens the issue, and we put it there deliberately. The essay begins with a question the author asked himself under campus oaks before sunrise: what if trees care about us? He pursues it through Orthodox Christian theology, Jungian psychology, Whitehead's process philosophy,[3] Kabbalah and Hindu thought, and he says in his abstract that the tone leans toward conversation rather than formal scholarship. He also suggests that his thesis may be felt as well as argued. Much work in plant studies depends on that admission and rarely makes it aloud. A reader who meets it first will know what kind of attention the rest of the issue is asking for. Lina Mandal's essay, by contrast, makes a claim that can be tested and contested. She notes that Yggdrasil, the Ashvattha, the Bodhi tree and the Maya world tree all place a tree at the centre of the cosmos, and she follows the image to Darwin's branching sketch in Notebook B.[4] Her argument is that traditions with no contact chose the tree because its form fits the problem of thinking about descent and difference, a thesis she calls epistemic convergent evolution. Readers will want to push on that phrase, and we hope they do. We are glad to publish it from a writer at the start of her career.

Two essays look at poetry written long before the term plant blindness existed. Neelima B. reads Sangam poetry as phytography, or plant writing.[5] In the *akam* poems the five landscapes take their names from flowers and plants, so a region, a mood and a plant arrive together in a single word.[6] Anindita Basak turns to Bengal, to Toru Dutt's casuarina, which outlasts the family that mourns beneath it,[7] and to Jibanananda Das, whose poem "Abar Asibo Phire" lets the speaker thin out into grass and delta.[8] The Tamil poets and the Bengali poets are far apart in time and language, yet both let plants carry what a place means to the people who

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[3]Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978).

[4]Charles Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836–1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Enquiries*, ed. Paul H. Barrett et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The branching sketch is on p. 36 of the manuscript of Notebook B.

[5]Patrícia Vieira, "Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing," *Environmental Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2015): 205–20; John Charles Ryan, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[6]A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[7]Toru Dutt, "Our Casuarina Tree," in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), 137.

[8]Jibanananda Das, "Abar Asibo Phire," in *Rupasi Bangla* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1957).

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live in it. Neither needed a theory of the vegetal to do this. The theory came later, and these two essays go back to see what the poems were already doing. Neelima B. shows a landscape named after a flower, so that the plant is the address as well as the decoration. Basak shows a casuarina that stays standing after the people who loved it have gone, and a speaker who agrees to become grass. In both cases the plant is where the poem ends up, and the human speaker is the one who has to adjust.

A second group of papers deals with forests as contested ground. Pravat Ranjan Sethi and Anjani Kumar Shrivastava write about the Saora, Kondh, Dongria, Juang and Bonda communities of Odisha. They treat sacred groves and shifting cultivation as archives, and they argue that colonial forestry and later development policy heard none of what these places were saying.[9] Their proposal is to read the landscape itself as an inscription site: forests, they say, are already narrated, and the historian's task is to learn how to read what is there. Sumana Sardar reads Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*[10] and the Munda rebellion of 1899 to 1900 with the forest as a participant, no longer a backdrop. The novel's last plea, in Sardar's reading, is to be allowed to listen. Tess Ezzy sets Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*,[11] with its Sundarbans mangroves and the *sundari* tree, beside Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*,[12] and uses the term Plantationocene to explain why the two books belong together.[13] Land that has been surveyed and logged has also been discussed at length by people who never asked it anything. Read together, the three papers move from a record kept by people who live in a forest, to a novel that gives the forest a part in the action, to a comparison of two books that asks what surveying and logging did to the conversation.

Two articles ask what happens when plants stand in for people who have been denied a voice. Shristi Mehta and Archana Jaiswal read Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*[14] through

[9]Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[10]Mahasweta Devi, *Aranyer Adhikar* (Calcutta: Karuna Prakashani, 1977).

[11]Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (HarperCollins, 2004).

[12]Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

[13]Donna Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking — About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos* 81, no. 3 (2016): 535–64; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[14]Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Granta, 2015).

Spivak,[15] Marder[16] and Crenshaw,[17] and they take Yeong-hye's slide out of speech as a form of resistance rather than collapse. Yeong-hye's repeated declaration that she is not an animal anymore[18] belongs, in their account, to a longer refusal of the categories that keep women, animals and plants in the same lower rank. Sampurna Chowdhury reads Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*[19] through ecofeminism. Her case rests on Nittilai's sacrifice and on the women of Kodarapalli in Odisha, who have patrolled their forest in rotating groups for decades under the practice called *thengapalli*. Here the editors would add a question of our own. When a woman's body, or a woman's silence, is read as vegetal, does the plant gain a hearing or only lend a figure of speech? Feminists have criticised the linking of women with nature for decades,[20] and Chowdhury's paper accepts that link where others would hesitate. We have left the argument open on purpose, and we would welcome replies. The question applies to Yeong-hye as much as to Nittilai. Mehta and Jaiswal read her silence as a refusal, while Chowdhury reads the sacrifice and the patrol through a framework that many feminists have contested. Both are serious readings, and a reader who accepts one is not obliged to accept the other.

Riley Harper's article on Diana Beresford-Kroeger's *Our Green Heart*[21] is the most hopeful in the volume. Harper describes Beresford-Kroeger as the last child in Ireland taught by *seanchaí* storytellers, who later trained as a biochemist. The article follows her from those stories to the chemistry of transpiration and carbon, and it asks whether Druidic lore and conservation science can sit in one book. It is also the only piece here that wants to tell readers what to do next, which gives it a different temper from the more guarded readings around it. After so much careful hesitation, we were glad of one writer willing to say plainly that something should be done.

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[15]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[16]Marder, *Plant-Thinking.*

[17]Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

[18]Kang, *The Vegetarian.*

[19]Girish Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[20]Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[21]Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *Our Green Heart: The Soul and Science of Forests* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2024).

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The reviews come last, and they are worth reading together. Ankita Priyadarshini returns to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,[22] a book usually remembered for its missing birdsong. Her review proposes that the silence also records vegetal testimony, the damage done to plants that cannot report it. Aishwarya Das Gupta reviews Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree*,[23] first published in India in 2017, in which Roy wonders what it would mean to live at the pace of a tree and looks to literature, film and her own days for an answer. More than fifty years separate the two books, and a reader who takes them in order of publication will see the concern move from poison to patience. One asks what was done to living things that could not object. The other tries on the pace of the living thing itself.

Reading the issue as a whole, we notice what it leaves unsolved. Every author has to speak for beings that do not share a language with the reader, and each has borrowed from someone else to manage it: a poet, a ritual, a storyteller, a Munda uprising, a forest community's record of its own land. None of them claims to have settled the matter. Ezzy says outright that neither a novel nor an essay can fully represent the vegetal world, and the honest course she describes is to keep paying attention without pretending to translate. We think that restraint is the issue's best quality. It also leaves a question for later issues. If listening is the right verb, what does a reader owe to what they hear? Sardar's novel ends by asking only to be allowed to listen, and Ezzy asks for attention without translation. The issue ends where those two requests meet, with no promise that anyone has yet learned how.

We thank the authors for their patience through revisions, the double-blind reviewers for their time, and the editorial board for careful work across the year. Arpan Mitra designed the cover. We hope readers will agree with some of these essays and quarrel with others, and we invite responses and rejoinders for the next issue.



Dr. Pradipta Shyam Chowdhury
Editor-in-Chief

[22]Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

[23]Sumana Roy, *How I Became a Tree* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017).

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