Enlivening Entanglements in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract
The age of the Anthropocene calls for a renovation in ways of being human and relating with others. Elif Shafak's 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees* features a talking tree narrator that lends itself well to exploring this topic. In the first part of the paper, I outline my arguments concentrating on entities on the move that come into focus through Shafak's novel: multispecies storying, migrants, and languages. In the second part, I describe the background of my university students and how I am using the novel in a seminar class whose objective is to increase attention and intimacy with the natural world. In this manner, I attempt to draw into conversation the relations between language learning, literary reading and other-than-human storying. I explore how language learning might be recognized as an art necessary to living well together, especially for the attention and slowing down it requires. Finally, I propose a shift from an exclusive focus on human languages to include other-than-human multispecies players.

Keywords: unselfing; plant-human relations; language learning; migration; immersion; creative coexistence

In the present era, variously known as the Anthropocene, the biosphere bears accelerating effects from the planetary force that humanity has become. As such, in the interests of alternative futures that reduce harm and promote flourishing, humanity is called to new ways of thinking and knowing, and to innovative forms of responding. Language has an important role to play, and foreign languages, in particular.

I propose that language learning primes a person for encounter with the more-than-human world. I focus on the ways it can widen our circle of human *and* more-than-human acquaintances, offer ways to overcome alienation and build a richer sense of community by bringing into awareness a host of companions whose presence may previously have

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gone unnoticed. Specifically, I am interested in cultivating intimacy, presence, and reciprocity with the more-than-human world.

On matters of language, we would do well to remember that language is not a uniquely human trait. Plant researcher Monica Gagliano (2017) notes that more-than-human others 'share with our species a variety of cognitive and perceptual mechanisms that constitute "language" in its broad sense' (83). She is strongly critical of the human exceptionalist bias that continues 'being indoctrinated in schools and universities worldwide as scientific fact' stating that this 'narcissistic way of thinking about the world perpetuates an attitude of disregard for the nonhuman world and, more generally, the natural environment' (85). It is the case, rather, as David Abram (2010) observes, that 'language accrues … to all sensible phenomena. All beings have the capacity for speech—all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings' (172). There is an 'intra-action' of matter and meaning, Karen Barad reminds us, such that 'knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part' (qtd. in O'Neill 2024: 810).

Val Plumwood (2009) enjoins that we 're-imagine the world in richer terms' (127), noting that to do this depends both on a culture of stories that reanimates the world and one that situates humans as members of the ecological community. Only then, she argues, might we humans remake ourselves, sympoetically, 'so as to become multiply enriched but consequently constrained members of an ecological community' (125). There is an intercultural commons inhabited by language teachers and learners that gives access to a rich plurality of shared stories, I wish to argue, a fecund place for the imagination to form an Anthropocene response-able community.

I have found in Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) an engaging resource that has been useful in gaining deeper insight and understanding of cultivating intimacy and presence and reciprocity with the more-than-human world. Reading this novel in English with my Japanese university seminar students has been an opportunity to engage with authentic material and has lent itself to lively and generative discussions of ecological concepts and theories. The novel is a story of troubled love, as much as our cultural moment amid this 'polycrisis' is, with a curious and surprising dénouement. Major themes include migration and displacement, inherited trauma, loss, grief and ecological

anxiety but also, resilience, ongoingness, love and reciprocity within human and nonhuman communities, and between them.

Language learning, literary reading and multispecies' storying

> We … can open another door to a richer world, and can begin to negotiate life membership in an ecological community of kindred beings. (Plumwood 2009: 121)

Foreign language learning, as much as reading works of literature, points to a desire to cross a boundary, to enter, share and participate in another 'world' and engage with different, not necessarily human, ways of knowing and being. Both language and reading arts are modes of world-making. Undertaking training in a new language, like opening the world of a new book, signals a willingness to shape-shift and metamorphose, to be among strangers ('unmet friends') and learn to reciprocate, interpret, to be unsettled and vulnerable, and response-able. A shift and extension from an exclusive focus on human languages to include more-than-human, multispecies players is worth our consideration: there are worlds crying out for renovations in our ways of being human and in our relating with others.

Language learners, and readers, leave home: they are (ideally) open to experimentation, and to transformation. Letting go of the habitual ease of the mother tongue in favour of the other tongue invites submission to the slower modes of processing necessary to navigating different linguistic terrain and cognitive frameworks. These points are as relevant to language learning and to literary reading as they are to beginning to attune to communications and storying going on, in and around us in other-than-human worlds. I make use of the word 'storying' rather than 'storytelling' to make room for a multispecies orientation in line with Thom van Dooren's and Deborah Bird Rose's practice of 'Lively Ethography' (2016) which they define as 'a mode of knowing, engaging, and storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others and that, in so doing, enlivens our capacity to respond to them by singing up their character or ethos' (77). They explain that at 'the core of this notion of storytelling as an ethical practice is the understanding that the stories we tell are powerful contributions to the becoming of our shared world' (89). Learning another language is a necessarily unsettling venture, a kind of 'unselfing', as Iris Murdoch (2008) puts it, which 'opens to a progressive revelation of

something that exists independently of me'. Known and familiar methods of connecting give way, as the other (language) 'leads me away from myself toward something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. … to something which is very *like another organism*' (87, my emphasis). This description lays the foundation for what this essay means to propose: that language learning, in a broad sense, supported by the slow and carefully attentive habits of mind necessary to good reading, are potentially powerful portals that could support the emergence of multispecies, or other-than-human[1], sensitivities.

The encounter with the alien 'other' Murdoch references moves some tendrils on the circumference of my 'self'. Sufficiently allured, the self is made, at least, permeable, perhaps augmented, and the circle of (potential) acquaintance is widened (Macy 2018). Our encounter changes and recreates me. Entangled, we become-together (Wright 2014), something renewed. I belong in a new assemblage, in a new way. In some way, however provisionally, this entity I acknowledge and commit to coming to know, adds even as it subtracts; it rearranges my self-knowing. The 'other-ed' presences I follow in this reading of *The Island of Missing Trees* are beings on the move, a mix of natural and political others: multispecies players, and migrants, and languages.

Beings on the move

The lovers, a seed and a piece of a tree

The Island of Missing Trees artfully braids three separate periods of time, shuttling between temporalities and locations complicating 'the idea of having firm roots in any one time or place' (O'Neill 2024: 798), in preference for a more omnidirectional and dynamic rhizome-like arrangement that remains, however, coherent.

In the mid 1970s, in the context of rising tensions on the idyllic island of Cyprus, readers follow a budding, forbidden romance between two young islanders from different ethnic communities: Kostas, a Greek, Christian boy and Defne, a Turkish, Muslim girl. They are offered a place where they can meet privately, at a tavern called 'The Happy Fig', where

[1] See Price and Chao (2023) for a discussion on appropriate, hospitable terminology.

their cultural differences are met with tenderness and hospitality, rather than hostility, by the two owners, Yusuf and Yiorgos, who themselves belong to the Turkish and Greek ethnic communities. Another interwoven time thread, a period almost 30 years later, in the early 2000s, deals with the reconciliation of Kostas and Defne, as adults, and their decision to immigrate to London, from their conflict-ridden, war-damaged Cyprus. Traveling with the couple as they leave home to begin a new life together are two hidden beings whose lives will be inextricably linked as the narrative unfolds: their newly conceived child and a cutting of the ancient, now diseased and dying, eponymous fig-tree, companion of better days.

The narrative present takes place on the island of Great Britain, in a suburb of London, in the late 2010s, over a winter holiday beset by freak weather. Their now teenaged daughter, Ada, is going through a difficult adolescence and struggling with feelings of alienation for reasons not simply to do with grieving the recent, sudden death of her mother. The narrative present includes the surfacing of painful, haunting memories from her parents' youth in Cyprus in a period of disruption and strongly suggests that place-based influences (and traumas) are on the move, too, and passed along to following generations. Stephen O'Neill (2024) remarks on how 'young Ada … characterised by this phenomenon of transgenerational epigenic trauma, experiences the strange sensation that "far beyond her reach, someone's bones were breaking", … a continuation of stress and pain across time that she shares with the fig tree' (798). There is a shadow of unease and grief that permeates the present, an invasion from the past, and its gradual resolution over the course of the novel provides much to consider and enjoy.

Storying tree

What makes Elif Shafak's novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), exemplary as a contributor to the conversation of multispecies players is the talking tree narrator, a feral[2], fabulating fig tree who is first heard (but not identified as other-than-human) narrating the prologue: an evocative, elegiac remembering of the sights and sounds of the island paradise on which she (Fig is a 'she') was raised, in Cyprus, and the impacts of its violent, divisive modern history. This voice is a younger iteration of her

[2] The sense, expressed in Tsing et al. (2017) of being forced away from home as a result of 'landscape-changing human … projects' (2).

original self, not the hybrid who has been re-located and is in the process of making a new life. This 'transplant' first appears in London, identified as tree and endangered, as an impending winter storm bears down. Kostas, her current caretaker, once rescuer and old friend, has decided, in the hopes of protecting her, to bury her (7).

O'Neill (2024) reads the burial as a rhetorical device: giving a voice to 'a dead or inanimate object' so as 'to unmute the arboreal [voice]' (799). The tree is not dead, but alive and vulnerable. It is true, though, that the arboreal voice is released as she is carefully interred. Underground, she is con(s)t(r)ained and humbled, literally having entered the world of humus. Separated from her human friends, unselfed, disoriented and afraid, what seems like alienation is contradicted by the happy discovery that, in fact, she inhabits a thoroughly lively space. 'Life below the surface is neither simple nor monotonous. The subterranean, contrary to what most people think, is bustling with activity' (Shafak 2021: 80).

As we readers and language learners pass between worlds, do we not follow similar movements in through shadows of uncertainty before being able to make sense in the company of others? Readers learn from Fig about soil, her new milieu, its lively colours and compositions and that a 'tree has a thousand ears in all directions' (Shafak 2021: 80), and that she loves to sing and can be filled with love and pain, longing and memories. The tree's sensory perceptions give readers a sense of her unimagined capabilities and interiority and, through a growing sense of felt-connection, access to widening circles of recognition and inclusion and polite consideration. Hidden from her familiars, human and nonhuman, Fig will undergo a powerful metamorphosis that returns her to love more fully, to a new kind of containment, and to her human companions.

The fig tree is the dramatic and relational centre, a kind of *axis mundi*, of the novel. Raised literally at the centre of a tavern, she grows through a cavity in the roof and shares conversations with other creatures above, below and around her. She confides to the reader: 'Trees are never lonely. Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected' (Shafak 2021: 30). That 'everything' Shafak portrays in a rich tapestry of expressive beings and worlds: birds and bees and butterflies, mosquitos, bats and wasps, mice and humans, fossils, fire and rain.

Fig stands as an historical witnessing presence, bridging countries and generations, having lived to almost 100 years old. No matter the grandeur of age and experience of this 'plant person' (Hall 2011: xxii) it is, nevertheless, the case that plants are 'ultimate others' (Myers 2020: n.pag.; Middlehoff and Peselmann 2023: 176). So other are they that humans are often oblivious to them. In the novel, Fig harrumphs when Ada, feeling watched and overheard, calls Fig 'creepy', and lets loose an encyclopaedic tirade on the poor state of relations between trees, 'the oldest living organisms on earth who were here long before you arrived and will still be here after you have gone' (Shafak 2021: 44), and an ignorant, arrogant and insensitive humankind:

> Humans! After observing them for so long, I have arrived at a bleak conclusion: they do not really want to know more about plants. They do not want to ascertain whether we may be capable of volition, altruism and kinship. Interesting as they consider these questions at some abstract level, they'd rather leave them unexplored, and unanswered. (44)

Indignantly, she tells of her (kind's) amazing abilities, characteristics, vulnerabilities, and strengths. She surmises that the tree's absence of a face, something that 'mirrors theirs as closely as possible', (Shafak 2021: 46) is what causes human alienation from the vegetal. In spite of this, trees and humans are, marvellously, co-conspirators: we, the living, oxygen-dependent, are breathed into being by forests. They are our most powerful allies, and world-makers who know how to compose liveable, breathable, nourishing worlds (Myers 2021: n.pag.). Growing an appreciation of these powers, an 'arboreal imaginary' (Nitzke and Braunbeck 2022), and manners appropriate to these beings, is strongly encouraged by the Fig teacher.

The voice(s) and storying of this tree have opened my eyes in a completely new and enchanting way into the world of possibilities in other-than-human storying. Fig 'speaks' in the novel with a human voice, in human words, in a way that nevertheless opens our (reading) senses to the world around her, experiencing the world intimately from her perspective. Charges of anthropomorphism do not apply. Val Plumwood (2009) finds that

> its covert assumption is usually the Cartesian one that mentalistic qualities are confined to the human, and that no mentalistic terms can properly be used for the non-human. Attempts to apply intentional terms for the non-human can then be said to

> involve presenting them in unduly human-like terms … to bully people out of 'thinking differently'. (127)

Nitzke and Braunbeck (2022) concur, pointing out that 'writing about the natural world cannot help but take place within the limits and limitations of the human language, which also confines the expression of imaginaries of the more-than-human world' (347). Bridle (2023) counsels:

> If we can consciously bear in mind the fact of our difference, if we can recognize our own limited perspective while not enforcing it upon others, these things need not be a barrier to accessing and acting on the basis of shared interests and intentions. In fact, it is precisely through the acknowledgement of difference that shared action and shared life, without the weight of domination and control, becomes possible. (70)

The literary tree presented in this novel should, O'Neill (2024) argues, 'be understood as a branch of critical plant studies because … it thinks with and "through vegetal being" to challenge traditional ways of being human as handed down by Western epistemologies' (809). Challenging human exceptionalism involves rethinking our language so that it expresses and serves a more inclusive sense of life and liveliness.

Storying with symbionts

If collective flourishing and new life evolve through the long-lasting intimacy of strangers, as biologist Lynn Margulis holds (Haraway 2016: 60; Mazur 2009: n.pag.; Sheldrake 2020: 90–91), and migration is a natural process, readers are invited to reckon with place and boundaries and engage questions of who belongs, what kind of attention they receive and what kind of worlds are made possible in and by the presence of strangers, of both human and other-than-human kind.

The novel's dedication reads: 'To immigrants and exiles everywhere, / the uprooted, the re-rooted, the rootless, // And to the trees we left behind,/ rooted in our memories . . .' (Shafak 2021: n.pag.). The cover art on many editions of the book, by Josie Staveley-Taylor, shows a branch near the base of an aged and shapely trunk, sawn off, representing Fig's near-death experience after the war has caused a mass exodus of all who had once gathered at the tavern, and the abduction of her dear caretakers, Yusuf and Yiorgos. Abandoned by human companions, she, who, as Defne remarks on a final visit to the tavern, now a ruin, 'has witnessed everything' (Shafak 2021: 292), has grown weak and fallen victim to an

infestation Fig knows she cannot survive. Kostas, always compassionate to more-than-human others, attempts a rescue of this intimate, old familiar, taking a cutting that he smuggles over to Britain to see if she can make a life in London with his newly growing, migrant family.

The title, *The Island of Missing Trees*, then, is misleading in that it is not, in any straightforward way at least, a work of detection (though unearthing the past is an underlying theme that runs through the narrative), nor is it specifically concerned with deforestation (though damage to forests and trees is mentioned by Fig, certainly, as she disparages the carelessness of human culture). The 'missing trees' could, rather, be representative of migrants, a collective represented by the one tree, the feral Fig, who gives a full description of the characteristics of others like her, as a first-generation migrant (Shafak 2021: 23–24).

Language learning and relationship-building capacities for home-making are noteworthy in light of one of the English language teaching profession's primary areas of involvement: beings on the move. In response to one or more of the intersecting triple planetary crises—pollution, climate change, and loss of biodiversity—migration is predicted to displace large numbers of people in the coming decades (see, Vince 2022), with 'implications that are profound for human society and the work of English language teaching' (Goulah 2020: 8–9). Even now, according to immigration figures from the United Nations (n.d.), 'more people than ever live in a country other than the one in which they were born' (n.pag.).

Shafak frequently draws connections between trees and displaced others. Both trees and migrants are memory-keepers, which Shafak indicates can be both a gift and a curse; they may be visible to others only as foreign or strange, if they are even noticed; they may have been rescued from a certain death in their countries of origin (as Fig was) to make a new life in another place. They can adapt, purposefully change their behaviours, form communities and be neighbourly (Shafak 2021: 44). They may be 'grateful for the chances life has given them and scarred by what it has snatched away, always out of place, separated' (24). Both trees and migrants have suffered rejection and exclusion under the colonial mindset (Myers 2021: n.pag.), and the English language and the influences of imperialism have often been complicit in these harms and estrangements.

However, there are ways of establishing, as well as reviving, connection to place, of 'becoming native' and being truly at home. These invite the learning of an other-than-human language (facilitated by a practice of human language learning) (Kimmerer 2017: 134). Learning to be at home in new ways, cultivating relations with landscapes and creatures, noticing who shares the view with you, learning how to belong in place is not, and should not be, connected with any notion of nativist indigeneity. It is available to all who wish to deepen a connection to life and living in place. Mihnea Tănăsescu, in *Ecocene Politics* (2022), protests that

> the unreflectively assimilated idea of Indigenous-Native insists on rootedness to a particular land. This does two things: it encourages fantasies of harmony, and it effaces the history of migration that defines *any* people. In other words, the idea of inherent rootedness sits very uneasily with actual human history. (113)

Rather than bifurcating the indigenous (emplaced) and the migrant ('out of place') we can move towards a perceptual and social reciprocity that is 'open, changeable, multiple, and fundamentally non-nativist' (114) by practicing reverence, kinship and gratitude.

Storying in foreign languages

The language in which *The Island of Missing Trees* was written is English, a figurative border-crossing for the author in that English is not Shafak's mother tongue, but a foreign language she has had to work to cultivate. Shafak declares:

> I am not a native speaker. I did not grow up in a bilingual house, so English for me is an acquired language. And I will always be a late comer, or a newcomer, an immigrant in this language, which means there's always this gap between the mind and the tongue. The mind always runs faster and the tongue tries to catch up, as immigrants we are very much aware of that gap and it can be frustrating … . But at the same time, it can be inspiring. It can help you to pay more attention to new answers, to concepts that can't travel or can't be translated easily from one language to another. (qtd. in Nair 2021: n.pag.)

There are many reasons why a writer may venture away from the language of their heart and choose to enter another logic and sensibility and write exophonically. Practically, they may want to expand their readership by using a widely-used world language, like English. Another reason for

writing in a foreign language is that some writers want the challenge of writing in an acquired language, to, in a way, 'become-with' it, finding things they can express more easily, or interestingly, in one language over another (Shafak 2016). Migrants are more often able to experiment with this kind of playful composition and, as Shafak's writing shows, enjoy the fruits of discovery. The point is raised to suggest that the gap on the verge between languages that Shafak names is potentially generative. Ways of making sense can, with patience and attention, sensitize the learner to different perspectives and values, and so can be a foundation for storying with other-than-human beings and their worlds. 'We speak first and foremost not as disassociated individuals or an exceptional species', James Bridle (2023) remarks, 'but about and through and with the world' (150). Learning to be at home with, and attune to a polyphony of languages, human and more-than-human is, as Keith Leslie Johnson (2023) notes, 'a precondition to solidarity' (713). Where the solidarity that may arise from the practice of storying in foreign languages functions at the level of the commons, a deeper call to intimacy, ethical entanglement, care and concern sounds to the individual reader, or witness, to draw closer, allowing others' lives to enter one's own and to become response-able to them. 'All living creatures', van Dooren and Rose (2016) observe, 'respond to the world around them. What it means for each being, in each case, is quite different. It is, however, through these responses that worlds are constituted' (89).

Cultivating intimacy

Foreign language practice through literary reading can be a capacious, ecological mode of 'kinning' that enables a different, life-affirming, co-creative kind of nearby visiting. It has been remarked that reading 'in a foreign language is the most intimate way of reading' (Lahiri 2017: 163). Rather than framing foreign language as a commodity to be 'acquired' (Küchler 2021: 72) and mastered, for far away, international consumption, tourism and trade, it comes close and offers 'to add an anglophone identity while still sustaining [learners'] other identities' (Micalay-Hurtado and Poole 2022: 378).

Reading that is collaborative and co-creative can accomplish a great deal in language learning classrooms, as I have discovered. When literature is located in the reader (Fish 1980), voices and experiences are activated by the reader's notice, attention, and reflection, and become

potential nodes of connection with others. Interpretations enter a lively arena and take shape forming an 'interpretive community' (Fish: 14) as possible meanings are negotiated. The Reader Response Theory approach to literary reading encourages diverse voices and perspectives, positing that there are no fixed or pre-determined meanings in texts, but rather that meanings and insights emerge through the active involvement of readers in the process of meaning-making. I have found the affective approach that engages and values subjective responses most valuable. As well, it is useful for the students to make conscious socio-cultural contexts and differences, both in relation to the interpretation of the text and in relation to me, as a cultural outsider. Cagri Mart (2019: 78) notes the potential value of classroom discussions that help learners to express their emotional reactions, elicit responses from others, accept for consideration perspectives that complicate or deepen their interpretations, and corroborate their opinions. Crafting responses in the process of sharing ideas that have become enlivened by the text, enables widened and perhaps more intimate circles of acquaintance, the overcoming of alienation and loneliness, and the building of a meaningful sense of shared community.

Required as much for reading as for language learning, for human and more-than-human practices, Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey and Ursula Münster (2016) describe the play of attention and response in

> a multispecies approach [that] focuses on the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations, of complex 'ecologies of selves', dynamic milieus that are continually shaped and reshaped, actively—even if not always knowingly—crafted through the sharing of 'meanings, interests and affects' … this multiplicity, this multiplying of perspectives and influences, is key to what multispecies studies is all about. (3–4)

Multiplying perspectives in multi-'lingual', or multi-expressive, worlds, however, 'is not simply about assembling diversity, nor is it about the adoption of an easy relativism … rather, it is about "staying with the trouble" in an effort to meaningfully navigate one's way through the complexity of worlds in process' (van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster 2016: 11).

Reader Response Theory shares resonance with Rhizomatic Learning (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Cormier 2008; Brailas 2021), particularly in its scepticism towards experts' authority, given truths, and universal solutions, preferring instead an openness and hospitality toward local conversation and working things out in a way that regards, as Dave

Cormier (2008) proposes, 'the community as curriculum' (n.p.). In relation to opening to multispecies sensitivities, and in light of the novel in this study, and the observation by van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster (2016) that 'different knowledge practices … bring different worlds into being' (12), there is persuasive reason to believe a rhizomatic approach could be fruitful. Like the Reader Response approach, the rhizomatic approach sees learning as an emergent phenomenon that occurs within a given web of relations, always in the becoming, with no beginning or end:

> The role of the educator in such rhizomatic ecology is to empower participants to create alternative connections, new networks of thinking, and new patterns of relating with each other … . But it is not the educator that actually educates the students. The rhizome as a whole becomes the teaching apparatus, a multiplier of perspectives, and an amplifier of synergies. In such epistemology of learning, the primary role of the educator is not to teach in a straightforward manner, but rather to catalyze and facilitate the development of the rhizome. (Brailas 2021: 3)

Reading *The Island of Missing Trees* together in the seminar class I facilitate, through the discussions we have, and the discoveries and community in the classroom we make, my main hope is to increase attention to, and open pathways to intimacy with, the natural world. I am convinced that this is part of human memory (supported by Robin Kimmerer's findings; 2017: 132) and our human longing, and that the language arts can give us access to perspectives and pathways that revitalize our lively connections and entanglements.

Learning, situated

Our intercultural efforts and experiments toward renovation are described in the following section. I detail how students prepared before the course: how reading loads were managed and active participation orchestrated with classes in the garden, regular 'book salons', supplementary readings and send-off rituals for remembering and revivifying our shared presence on the planet. Two significant spheres of influence inform the context of learning here. Data show that Japan has made only minimal progress responding to the climate emergency. Youth, therefore, are ill-informed about what is on the horizon climate-wise. In addition, there is a strong, prevailing techno-optimist worldview that makes ecological cost invisible and influences agency and self-understanding in confounding ways. Against these headwinds our project began.

Local context

Strong evidence points to Japan's poor performance in response to advancing ecological crises. On the annual 'Climate Change Performance Index' (CCPI), Japan is down to 58th position out of 67 in 2024 (Burck 2023). Climate Action Tracker (2023), likewise, finds Japanese commitments to Net Zero 2050 'insufficient' (n.p.). Aike Rots (2019) strongly challenges the public face Japan presents remarking that '[w]hile academics, religious leaders, forest planters and journalists continue to spread the message of Japan as a nation of "nature lovers" who can teach the rest of the world how to live in harmony with nature, Japanese state agencies and corporations continue to contribute to widespread construction, (toxic) waste production and large scale deforestation abroad' (204; see also Gilbert 2024; Zero Emissions 2024).

Barriers to intimacy

What dominates in these anxious modern times, increasingly, are exploitative, desperately draining technological and mechanical worldviews and anthropocentric conveniences, with little thought given to our radical interdependence with more-than-human worlds. The technological mode of thinking might explain why, for example, though most students have been taught to varying degrees and effectiveness *about* the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is little to no understanding about what, in practice, 'sustainable' means, or 'development', nor of the disruptions that will be necessary to 'business as usual' and 'common sense', if more than 'greenwashing' or 'virtue signalling' is to be achieved. How is it, I have heard students wonder, that the SDGs are 'not working' (as if they were a switch that would reprogramme the world)? The 'objective', 'problem-solving' approach must, at least, share the road with softer, slower, more social processes of noticing more, and more sensitively.

Student background

The students in the seminar class have English levels more or less at pre-intermediate level (CEFR B1). Their literary reading skill and experience is generally low. Reading books is an activity undertaken by the majority of young people for schooling. For the most part, it has not been part of students' leisure or pleasure, and especially not in a foreign language.

Deep reading has an awkward position in the neoliberal university that gives lip service to the 'Liberal Arts' but prioritises concision, streamlining and efficiency over the lingering that can be enjoyed over reading and thinking (Manavis 2024). Nevertheless, it is mandatory in the university's English department that students engage in weekly extensive reading activities using graded readers. The aim is to habituate the reading of (English) books, to familiarise students' exposure to English materials, increase reading fluency and speed, cultivate taste and interest, increase confidence, general knowledge and intercultural ease. Anecdotally, most students have done no close reading until they enter university, neither in Japanese nor in English.

There is a plethora of resources in Japanese culture, old and new, which may give access to lifeways that pay better attention and craft better responses to a wider realm than the solipsistic human. For example, highlighting and recontextualising the practice of listening as part of getting to know the world differently evokes a beautiful practice from the students' own cultural repertoire, whereby listening is recognised as a synaesthetic practice in the Japanese arts:

> In Japanese the word *kiku*—'to listen' can indicate much more than simply a sound coming to our ears. *Kiku* is an act of 'appreciating something with all of our sharpened senses'. Appreciating the fragrance of incense and the taste of saké, for example, can be *kiku*; such appreciation normally involves identifying and judging quality and, more profoundly, is a highly established form of art that utilizes all the senses. (Kato 2015: 111)

A sharpening and widening of sensory perception is a pathway to a world of enchantment and discovery and contributes to heightened feelings and awareness of the presence of Others. The process takes time and reliably improves with practice. All four skills of language learning can be reimagined creatively and translated in and for ecological literacy and the deepening of sensory attunement for relationships in place. Listening invokes the receptive auditory sense primarily and, as shown, can reach other senses imaginatively. Reading invokes the receptive visual sense and, likewise, is actively imaginative and interpretive. Speaking (with others) invites creative playfulness and extension into other worlds, within and over the borders of the familiar, and writing is an assemblage of gifts received, to be offered in service of a renewal of story, culture and relations of care (Plumwood 2009: 125–126).

Coursework in practice

The structure of *The Island of Missing Trees* is helpful for managing weekly reading assignments. There are six main sections of the novel (How to Bury a Tree; Roots; Trunk; Branches; Ecosystem; and How to Unbury a Tree) which contain within them smaller section breaks marked by small tree icons. These divisions are helpful for managing weekly reading assignments. With a 90-minute class once a week, I assign a section a month, which amounts to reading about twenty pages a week, a reasonable load for my small group of third year Environmental Humanities in English seminar students. Students have followed a freer concentration on the 'context' and 'reader' more than the 'text' and 'language' approaches outlined by Jasmijn Bloemert et al. (2017), and Shafak's kaleidoscopic approach seems to be holding the attention of my 'digital native' students very well.

Preparation

In early spring, six weeks before classes for the new academic year began, as we were meandering out of winter, I instructed the eight members of my seminar class to purchase the novel and to choose a tree that they could visit and observe regularly and to begin a custom of attending to any changes they noticed with the tree. They could keep (digital) records if they were inclined, and I let them know I would be asking for an account of the experience in our first class session. I asked them, in addition, to observe their own minds and feelings and to discern whether they noticed any changes during or after this practice. The long-term objective of this small practice (as yet undisclosed) is that students learn to talk, not only about, but with a tree in the manner described by Nurit Bird-Davis: 'to perceive what it does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree ... expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility" (qtd. in Weber 2020: 9).

Beginning attunement: Reading (in) the inner garden

When the semester started, in April, amid peak tree appreciation festivities, the Japanese season of *ohanami* (cherry blossom viewing), we gathered outdoors in a circle on a crisp, sunny, mid-morning for class under a dappled trellis dripping with fat brown-purple wisteria buds, in the

inner-garden on campus. I wanted as lively a context as possible to activate students' memories, have them relaxed and, at the same time, to begin to gently waken sensory and embodied perceptiveness. Traditionally, East-Asian university students are accustomed to formal learning settings within four, white walls at desks in rows, and are commonly accompanied by advanced technological equipment. Meeting outdoors, I hoped to introduce them to a more animated (and animating) context, along with some, at the time, unrecognised learning and teaching companions. An 'epistemology of physicality [is] necessary to understanding the role of humanity in the world and to understanding how humans relate to other creatures', remark Marco Micalay-Hurtado and Robert Poole (2022: 384). Rather than learning *about* 'nature', we would be intimately immersed in our subject matter.

In respect of students' experience and skill with close reading, I give some guidance on active reading skills, encouraging them to make notes as they read in as many of the following categories they find relevant: keywords, questions, quotes, theme notes, and web-weaving. This last category I mean to use as a way for students to curate and weave connections with their own, personal findings, knowledge and experiences. *The Island of Missing Trees* is challenging for them to read in English, and I want them to make, and take, time to enjoy the challenge, the story and the discussions raised.

The monthly 'book salon'

Once a month a 'Book Salon' session is held for which students prepare one of the six sections of the novel for discussion. To keep students accountable for the completed reading assignments, I prepare a reading quiz with between five to eight short-answer questions that can be done in about twenty minutes at the start of the class. I collect the papers to monitor progress and comprehension, not for assessment, and put the students into two groups of four for discussion in English, as much as possible, following the quiz. In the last twenty to thirty minutes, I elicit questions and comments in open class and talk about things that caught my attention or that I think are important to notice. Students are often unlikely to pick up on cultural references, especially the intertextual references, some quite distant from their culture and general knowledge, and need help to recognise and build an enriched sense of the layers of the text. I have found, also, due to their lack of experience with literary reading, mostly,

but also possibly because of cultural differences, that often they are unable to discern the weight or relevance of events in the narrative.

At the end of the discussion class, I assign a short homework feedback paper inviting written responses. Students may follow a more structured approach that includes following loose prompts such as: ‘comments and questions’, ‘what topics caught your interest?’, ‘what would you like to understand more clearly or deeply?’, ‘what touched you or moved you?’ and ‘who do you know who resembles one of the characters?’. Alternatively, they may respond in essay form. These papers are shared in small groups at the beginning of the following week’s session and I collect and comment on these for both content and use of English.

Supplementary readings (or, food for the hyphae)

Between the monthly Book Salon weeks, I have selected three secondary, nonfiction readings to act as ‘compost’ for interpretations of the novel. My hope is that they provide foundations for thinking that go on to help develop ecological and multispecies sensitivities, encourage greater eco-cultural awareness, intimacy with and care for the natural world. Students read and annotate individually and then we process the texts together.

The first is the introduction to Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (1999) whose insightful aphorism: ‘The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects’ (82), is highly relevant as we move away from the concept of nature as resource and commodity and towards cultivating a facility for other-than-human sensitivities and communication. With simple clarity, Berry remarks in the opening paragraph on our need to orient ourselves in the world as we find it, and why: ‘We need to understand where we are and how we got here. Once we are clear on these issues we can move forward with our historical destiny, to create a mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on the planet Earth’ (ix). This ‘mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship’ (61) invites us to acknowledge that all living things have interiority and expressivity. ‘To subjectify is not necessarily to co-opt, colonize, exploit. … Rather, it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination’, remarked Ursula LeGuin (in Tsing et al. 2017: M16). Indeed, to perceive a being as a subject is a meaningful measure of what, or rather, who, is deserving of respect. No being, writes Kimmerer (2017), is an ‘it’ and points out for English users that ‘it’s all in the pronouns’ (132). ‘All’ being the violence of ‘depersonalising’ what is a living being

(even when we haven't the sense to recognise this, always) (Berry 1999: 1).

The second reading assignment is Tom Oliver's 2024 essay about a campaign to redefine the word 'Nature' to include humans. It offers a chance to think about the way language can either divorce the speaker from the natural world or bring us into 'a community of expressive presences that are also attentive and listening' (Abram 2010: 173). It asks students to consider how words enter into use, and how words live, change and get buried. In class, this essay opened up a rich and interesting cross-cultural discussion on the words and ideographic characters used in Japanese for 'nature', which involved human presence and which did not, and we explored how these reflect 'ecological dimensions of language'. I was curious to see whether or how, as Abram (2010) claims, the 'written characters [might] function as windows opening onto a living landscape that still speaks, onto a sensorial cosmos that still bears a kind of primary meaning' (176). What emerged from the discussion of the ideograms was beyond me (I confess) but interested the students who keenly and kindly tried to help me understand.[3] I realized that understanding these concepts has important implications for (cross-cultural) environmental communications.

The word *kyousei*, which holds some promise for deeper understanding of Berry's (1999) 'mutually enhancing mode' (ix), generated the most discussion of all the ideograms used to express nature, or the environment. *Kyousei* is often translated as 'symbiosis', but Jason Goulah (2020) glosses it more poetically as 'creative coexistence' (after Ikeda) explaining that

> the agentive perspective of *kyousei* envisions ecological interdependence as active and engaged, not passively symbiotic, and it leverages ecological selfhood as a basis for value creation dialogically with other human beings and the natural world. Thus, *kyousei* embodies a spiritually and materially transformative potential in that 'our heart or mind encompasses our environment; likewise the changes that occur in our environment arise from our heart or mind' (Ikeda 2013: 320). In this way, 'each

[3] It matters, here, to add that I am not Japanese and my facility with the language, though quite well acculturated, is far from competent. It is 'partial and flawed' (Haraway 2016: 10) and I am vulnerable because of it. The othering my students and I experience in relationship pushes us both to grow in unpredictable and unexpected places.

> individual being functions to create the environment that sustains all other existences' (Ikeda 2010: 173). (Goulah 2015: 94)

Kyousei is also variously translated as 'conviviality', a concept more familiar to the European mind, and Bing Song and Yiwen Zhan's (2024) work bringing Alain Caillé's 'convivialism' into dialogue with the Chinese *gongsheng* (a translation of *kyouse*i) has been fruitful and informative.

The third companion reading is Joanna Macy's essay entitled 'The Greening of the Self' (1991), widely available online. This reading, among other things, offers a foundation for thinking more deeply about borders and identity. Where Murdoch takes the philosophical approach to 'unselfing', Macy's is spiritual, and Buddhist-informed, something the students are inclined to recognize, even if they are not practitioners in a religious way. Readers may consider the spectrum that lies between their ego-self and the eco-self. In a workshop Macy facilitates, she writes of a student's wakening to a multispecies world, becoming

> able to extend his sense of self to encompass the self of the tree and of the whale. Tree and whale are no longer removed, separate, disposable objects pertaining to a world 'out there'; they are intrinsic to his own vitality. Through the power of his caring, his experience of self is expanded far beyond that skin-encapsulated ego. (184)

For this reading assignment, I divide the text and assign individual students paragraphs to summarise and explain in the following class, jigsaw style, before gathering to discuss and piece together an overview of the whole. This reading was the lengthiest and most difficult for the students, as evidenced by machine 'participation' in the assignment, and took a lot of time to process.

Findings

Students were shocked and a little confused by the talking tree, at first, but she has been a magnificent teacher! They have reported changes in their ways of looking at, seeing, and sensing the world around them, thanks to Fig. In early summer, I asked them to report again on the trees they 'chose' in spring. This time they were able to see 'their' tree as the centre of a network of relations, a 'world in a world', an *umwelt,* in which they, too, were a part. Students appeared more than willing to accept the possibility of the tree's subjectivity and recognised that imaginative, feelings-based

connections did not make the connection less meaningful. Students spoke of birds, insects, spiders and their webs and were sensitive to relationships of support. This is the expansion of sensory perception that I had hoped for. At first, they did as they were told: they identified a tree, named it in English and Japanese and described what they looked at, but did not register all there was to take in. Now, they are better attuned and more sensitive.

As for their practices in English, I can say that the students really did develop diverse, insightful responses to the novel's teeming opportunities for young adult-focused discussion, they deepened personal connections with classmates, increased their cross-cultural knowledge and intertextual literacy, and developed confidence in their own interpretations of the novel. Students actively participated and engaged emotionally and intellectually in extended output in English both in their discussions and written assignments.

Conclusion

Before we reach the end of the course in a few weeks' time, to further relationship-building, a sense of home-making as well as practice in spoken fluency, I plan to adapt and include one or two immersion rituals. They represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based. One possibility is John Seed and Joanna Macy's 'Council of All Beings' (1988; and Macy 1991: 202–205), which has students speak as another being in the natural world. Erin Robinsong and Merlin Sheldrake's 'Return Address' (2023) ceremony is another, sure to rouse the imagination to intimacy and presence. It echoes the advice given in the novel on the importance of talking to trees and puts into guided practice their initial spring pre-class exercise. I expect these to further strengthen their attention to local landscapes and beings, who may once have been invisible, or may never have been seen to be worthy of notice. Students in the seminar no longer look at the world quite the same as they did. They have widened their circle of acquaintances, are finding ways to recognize more-than-human companions and as such are building a richer sense of community. The ritual will be the final input before the work of the rhizome sets off in a new direction in the research and writing of the graduation thesis.

Micalay-Hurtado and Poole (2022) claim that 'ELT classrooms have tended to discuss knowledge abstractly rather than in connection to the

physical world' and that 'this is [neither] the sole nor the more complete interpretation of knowledge-making' (375). Enlightenment thinking is coming to an end, and there are portals opening through which we might welcome 'Enlivenment' thinking, as I hope this essay has shown. Weber (2016) writes:

> The political agenda of the Enlightenment was intended to elevate humankind from its incapacitation by granting it rational agency. A policy of life (Enlivenment) enlarges this struggle to a more comprehensive goal: liberating the feeling and creative human from the colonization by an ideology of dead matter, granting it the right not only to rational, but also to embodied agency, and to meaningful experience. (n.pag.)

Working to heal the harms of a language, English, that has arrogated to itself the power to divide and conquer the natural world is paramount, so that, as Kimmerer (2017) teaches, there are other ways than being human to be recognized as a lively presence and 'to be worthy of respect and moral concern' (133). We must engender flourishing differently. I concur with Natasha Myers who says: 'The stories I want to read are about people who learn how to conspire with the plants to heal our relations with one another and with the earth. … to recognize that human and more-than-human futures demand we all step into our responsibilities to the land and to reimagining our communities and relationships …' (Myers, Middlehof and Peselmann 2023: 275). Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* meets these calls with warmth and beauty and wisdom, and provides a wonderful story of enlivening entanglements leading readers into possibility, to worlds within worlds.

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