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Vagabond: The Trans-Species Ecologies of Plant/Human Encounters

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"We will save the corn because the corn is us and we are the corn." – Anonymous Activist for
 "Maya Mother Seeds in Resistance" (Brown 2013, 160)

"So that's us: processed corn, walking." – Michael Pollan (2006, 22)

The opening scene of the acclaimed documentary *King Corn* (2007) shows Ian Cheney and Curtis Ellis, main protagonists, learning that corn constitutes one of the main carbon molecules of their hair. Segue to introduce the crop's omnipresence in North American processed foods, principally used as sweetener, starch and animal feeds, the almost banal scientific fact presented in this scene is mesmerizing, providing a somewhat embodied support to the popular environmentalist saying "you are what you eat," or to Donna Haraway's poetic understanding of bodies and species as "full of their own others, full of messmates, of companions" (Haraway 2008, 165). Corn has indeed subtly made its way into our body, bite after bite, making it hard not to share Ian and Curtis' awe while watching the film's opening scene as it suggests that we, eaters of North American food, unknowingly became corn. Well established as the darling crop of nutritional technoscience, the introduction of genetically engineered corn in the late nineties juxtaposed to its wide presence in processed foods has spawned important political resistance, especially within Indigenous communities in Mexico. From street protest,

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field-testing to heirloom seeds international distribution, what is it exactly these activists were so desperately trying to protect?

The first epigraph to this article illustrates a traditional Mayan saying later epitomized as a resistance motto against the use of biotechnology in corn agriculture. *The corn is us, and we are the corn*. It could be tempting to frame this saying as a myth or cultural belief, but such notions tend to domesticate epistemologies that differ from our own and stabilize them as marginalities, a form of philosophical colonization, if you will (Kohn 2014). This article, rather, tries to engage with this claim for what it says, expressing a form of reciprocal being between humans and corn, perhaps even an ontological relationality that transgresses physiological boundaries. Should a parallel be drawn between this saying and the North American transformation into corn caused by overconsumption of processed foods? While both situations seem to refer to a way in which humans *are* corn, what their juxtaposition conveys might rather be an instance of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls an equivocation, homonymic claims or events that don't mean the same thing but convey different perspectival positions (1998; 2004). While we, North Americans, are corn because we "are what we eat" and it appears that most of what we eat is corn, the Mayan saying rather seem to suggest a form of ontological reciprocity between human and vegetal beings. Following Viveiros de Castro, recognizing differences of perspectives between the author and the other, hence opening the possibility that each one's perspective quivers, can methodologically control equivocations. This article seeks such friction: letting my North American perspectival position be confronted with the work of equivocation, I search within our own

epistemology for tools to embrace the possibility of human/plant trans-species encounters inspired by this Mayan claim.

Engaging with this claim not as an analytic that reveals the tenets of Mayan culture but rather expresses a form of human/crop relationality that reach beyond speciation has the potential to provide academics and activists involved in resistance to agro-biotechnology with a distinct perspective to think that helps us rethink our relationship to food as an ecological imperative increasingly attuned to the nonhuman beings subdued by biopolitical control by technoscientific agriculture (Andrée 2007, 78-79; Haraway 2008, 59). While the term “speciation” usually refers to the emergence of a new species through biological evolutionary processes, I voluntarily turn the word on its head and use it to refer to the process of the conceptual making of a given body or being into a species, the categorization of a being through its separation from what it is not. Seeking an ontological relationality between humans and plants, this twist on speciation commits a second equivocation between plants and humans themselves, as our epistemology assumes them to be distinctive beings. This necessitates that the possibility of human/plant reciprocity be accessed from within their encounter by paying attention to the different events and practices through which they meet. How do humans and plants convene and what do they share to potentially make them merge with one another? What are our common languages, modes of existence or relational entanglements? What constitutes plants’ humanity and humans’ vegetality? Why is there even a separation in the first place? What is it we are so deeply sharing that we are in fact one and the same, which means of course intrinsically multiple and alter? Engaging with

these questions, this article attempts to find a common substance between vegetal and human life, holding them in a perpetual journey of co-constitution and trans-speciation.

I suggest that through the circulation of affects, as a set of networked communicative processes, humans and plants meet and transgress their respective conceptual and physiological boundaries. The theoretical journey such an argument requires attempts to overcome environmentalism as the interpretative lens with which to engage resistance to agro-biotechnology, which still assumes a separation between nature and culture, science and politics, humanity and the rest (Bennett 2010, 111-112). The article moves as follows. In the first place, I inscribe my concerns for human/plant relationality within the emerging movement known as new vitalism/materialism or vital materialism. Secondly, following Giorgio Agamben (2002) and Michael Marder (2013), I provide a short overview of the philosophical roots of vegetal exclusion within western metaphysics. From there, the three last sections pay critical attention to two texts that could aptly be characterized as new materialist, through which human/plant relationships are addressed.

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I. New materialism and vegetal life

This article's attention to human/plant encounters is framed within growing inquiries in the humanities and social sciences into the interrelations between human and nonhuman species. Inheritor of deep ecology, ecofeminism, actor-network theory, posthumanism and cyborg theories, and very often informed by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome philosophy (1980), this movement is mostly called either new materialism, new vitalism or vital materialism in the humanities, and the ontological turn in the social

sciences. While each has its own set of terminologies, concerns and methodologies, such distinctions are mostly disciplinary and the current article moves between each one's critical tools. Each shares a sincere engagement with humanity's radical alterity, its networked interrelations with a vast array of nonhuman beings. While certain thinkers, especially proponents of the ontological turn, see the move towards attention to multispecies ontologies as a way to go beyond post-structuralist deconstructive methodologies and their insistence upon recognition of the interpreter's position, such concerns might still be in continuity with the post-structuralist project that constantly reiterates a fundamental alterity, wherein agents are pre-constituted by their relationality towards the Other (Derrida 1967; Lévinas 1968; Butler 1997, etc.). Here, the other is not always human – it even rarely is; is there even such a thing as human? – but is nonetheless endowed with agency. Recognition of such continuity prevents one from being lured towards the ambition of obtaining an objective description of reality; the interpreter, inherently alter, is still positioned within the analysis. However her own perspectives are themselves opened to disruption, alteration, and destabilization arising through equivocation.

Most new materialists are motivated by an ecological imperative: in the age of the Anthropocene, global climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental destruction, the very paradigm that assumes a separation between human and nature, and a dominance of the former on the latter, must shift towards a comprehension of ourselves as integral to more-than-human ecologies. While it is well known that technoscientific agriculture and its subjugation of vegetal life to biopolitical control has played its part into numerous current ecological issues such as the impoverishment of soils and vegetal

biodiversity loss, very few studies have ventured in the realm of vegetal agency. In most cases the most we get is a recognition that a given more-than-human paradigm ‘works with plants and trees too’. Three types of encounters with nonhuman life are to be found at the forefront of the movement: animal agency (e.g.: Kohn 2013; Massumi 2014; Parikka 2010), matter agency (e.g.: Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Morton 2013), and (bio)technological agency (e.g.: Bardini 2011; Braidotti 2013; Zylińska 2009). This is not a question of type-centrism, since vital materialism refuses or at least deconstructs the very notion of centrism. When venturing beyond the human, one is quickly confronted to irreducible multiplicities, crowds of types and beings that all seem to differ from what we had stabilized as human and as nature. The task at hand therefore is to dive-into the intricacies of specific encounters between types by bounding assemblages around specific events, as suggested by Jane Bennett (2010), keeping in mind that the very notion of type is tainted with anthropocentrism.

The rarity of human/plant encounters analyses might rather be an outcome of the larger western philosophical tradition from which we stand, built upon the assumption of a foundational dichotomy between animal and vegetal existence structuring *life itself*. While the scholars mentioned above remarkably deconstruct the dichotomies between humanity and animality, subject and object, and nature and technics, vital materialists must also undertake the task of tearing down the one holding the animal and the vegetal apart. This essay embarks upon such journey, diving into the intricacies of the vegetal world and its encounters with the human; “suivre les plantes” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 19). In one of her most recent text, “Sowing World: A Seedbed for Terraforming With Earth Others,” Donna Haraway pays attention to plants’ inter-species

communicative abilities (2013). Using the image of seed sowing to reiterate her companion species project, the appearance of vegetal beings in her work, so central to this whole enterprise, advocates greater investigations of vegetal relationality. Suggesting that “every species is a multispecies crowd” (2008, 165), Haraway demonstrates how the notion of species, or more precisely speciation, draws arbitrary limitations around perceptible bodies that always extend beyond themselves and couldn’t be without being other than what they appear to be.

Haraway’s dedication to humans’ alterity with technologies, matter, animals, microbes, and now plants, enacts a continuous opening up of species beyond and below what they are said to be, inviting us to critically engage with epistemological separations between humans and nonhumans and develop an ethical stance towards beings that are conceptually separated from our very own. Ethical companion species interact through response, respect and responsibility (response-ability). Ultimately, this essay hopes to find such ethical engagement between human and corn through a humanities based approach to agricultural practices. Before turning to modes of encounters between humans and plants, the next section presents an overview of the ways through which vegetal existence has been dichotomized and excluded from the western metaphysical conception of life.

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II. A metaphysics of isolated roots

Ask a vegan. It is very likely she will have been asked this question hundreds of times: *if it’s not ethical to eat animals, why isn’t it the same with vegetables? Plants are alive too!* to which most answer that *it’s just not the same*. Much is overlooked here, but this answer naively exemplifies the point at which differentiation between animal and vegetal

life is deeply anchored in our western conceptual paradigms. Not surprisingly, most of my friends, family and colleagues grant me with a suspicious look when I explain that the core of this essay project is to address the possibility of plant/human communication. True, we can't lock eyes with a plant the way Derrida does with his cat (Derrida 2006), our interrelations with plants being driven by what Giorgio Agamben calls a "cécité réciproque," perceptual differences that result in blindness to the other's faculties (2002, 81). To our human eye, plants don't move, sense, perceive or think. What made us assume that, while alive, such were lacks, deprivations or absences granting us the right to position their liveliness as inferior to ours? Agamben and Michael Marder's answer is that it all started with Aristotle.

Aristotle's hierarchization of living beings exposed in *De Anima* is well known, but a short summary goes as follows. Humans are distinct from animals because they are endowed with rational aptitudes – they are "rational animals" – and animal life differs from vegetal life because the latter not only lack rationality but also locomotion, perception, and sensitivity. All are endowed with *psukhê*, translated as soul but perhaps better defined as a "life principle" (Thacker 2010) indicating Aristotle's recognition of each body's liveliness inasmuch as each liveliness differ from the others; each are from a different type. Life is both dichotomized, opposing animal to vegetal life, and hierarchized, with plants at the bottom, animals in the middle and humans at the top. Aristotle's "theological ladder" (Marder 2013, 26) initiated a speciation process through which beings were isolated from one another. Life became that which cannot be defined but which must always be articulated, divided, and categorized (Agamben 2002, 28). In *The Open*, Agamben proceeds to retrace the historical evolution of such speciation,

insisting on its centrality in the development of modern sciences and politics. Modern sciences, he contends, relied upon the opposition of vegetal to animal life as a condition for the dissociation of humanity from the animal realm. Vegetal life became a landscape, an internal form of life composed of abstract mechanisms, upon which animal life, external and relational, could happen (30-31), hence depriving plants from relational abilities and confining them to their unreachable interiorities. Modern politics, on the other hand, also evolved upon such Aristotelian assumptions as the development of institutionalized biopower relied on a redefinition and generalization of what constitutes vegetal life, enforcing its non-subjective character, thus its confinement to the status of national biological heritage (31).

It is important to keep in mind that such grand narrative overlooks contingencies, has deterministic undertones and excludes from its linearity any events that might testify to stories happening in unknown registers. This story still has to be recalled however precisely because for its mechanisms to be debunked their reliance on generalizations, determinisms, exclusions and positivist comprehensions of progress and history need to be acknowledged from within their own parameters. They have induced continuity between Aristotelian metaphysics and humanism, rationalism, modernism and the current age of the Anthropocene. They have reiterated the human as the conceptual result of such exclusionary processes, the remaining of what it is not, and have perpetuated historically the shuttering of these unknown events, the intricacies, differences and contingencies of vegetal existence. An historical perspective upon speciation also demonstrates its progressive naturalization through which differences between plants, humans and animals have been made irreducible. Deconstructing such

processes unveils what Agamben terms “the anthropological machine,” (55-65) that situates speciation within the confines of the human mind. Through our “*cécité réciproque*,” we, humans, forget about our perspectival position towards others and get lured into taking our observations as objective descriptions. The fact that speciation has constantly repeated us as a dominant species underlines the tyrannical character of the anthropological machine that emphasizes differences over commonalities.

To meet with plants, the mechanisms of the anthropological machine that seek an essentialist reading of life must be torn apart: “l’essence de la vie n’est accessible que sous la forme d’une observation destructive” (Agamben 2002, 97). A non-essentialist engagement with human/plants relationality ought to turn towards our commonalities – nutrition, reproduction, and relationality, for instance – rather than our differences by, following Marder, cultivating an intimacy with vegetal beings (181). Tracing the lines of a phenomenological approach to vegetal encounters, Marder undertakes deconstruction of western metaphysical assumptions of a separation between human and vegetal life by investigating vegetal vitality, a “riddle buried in the folds of western metaphysics” (27) that built life as “objectification and death”(19). Aristotelian assumptions, following Marder, have uprooted humanity from its material foundations, its very vegetality, which refers to its heterogeneous, disseminated, nutritional, and relational character (57). The prioritization of rationality over such qualities, it follows, confined us within conceptualism and shut down the possibilities opened by our co-embodiment with others that take place beyond the human mind. For Marder, to follow the plant is to listen to its “silent deconstruction of metaphysics,” to let ourselves reconnect with our own vegetality through phenomenological, deconstructive and weak thought encounters, albeit allowing

such methodologies to be challenged by the virtues of vegetal being (55), opening, in other words, our human perspectivism to plant perspectivism.

Life, Marder claims, must be disjointed from its theoretical apparatuses:

after we strip life of all its recognizable features, vegetal beings go on living; plant soul is the remains of the psyche reduced to its non-human and non-animal modality. It is life in its anarchic bareness, informed from the fact that it persists in the absence of the signature features of animal vivacity, and it is a source of meaning, which is similarly bare, non anthropocentric and yet ontologically vibrant. In a word, life as survival.
(22)

Bare life, un-conceptual being driven by nutrition, reproduction and relationality as motors of survival gets us to the core of vegetal existence, albeit these notions could arguably be claimed as conceptual and the very aim of reaching bareness antithetic to the enterprise of philosophical writing. This critique stresses the urgency of deconstructing not only the anthropocentric content of writing, but also its form and structure in a way that writing becomes an act of bare life in itself – which could make the topic of a whole dissertation, and which, I'm afraid, this essay hardly does by adopting a traditional academic structure that limits connections with plants beyond a human-centric conceptual level. Uncovering vegetal bareness, what Marder calls plant-thinking, guides non-vegetal beings to the discovery of their own vegetality. If western metaphysics had fooled us into thinking we were at the pinnacle of some kind of hierarchy between all livings and that humanity was a form of life opposed to vegetality, listening to plant-thinking helps us uncovering our isolated roots. Following Marder, all beings share

vegetality and plant-thinking aptitudes, not only what Aristotelian metaphysics would have called plants, but also humans and animals: we all reproduce, eat and relate.

Through the cultivation of an ethical intimacy with plants, we are offered opportunities to discover life in its non-conceptual bareness, or rather, as a dissemination and dispersal informed by ontological indifference, non-identity, and heteronomy. When uncovered, these axes form the components of an inclusive vegetal democracy, the larger political scope of Marder's phenomenological project, to which I should come back later in this essay.

Looking beyond western metaphysical conceptualization of life that holds us apart from vegetality, casting it as a structure upon which animal life can happen and a resource to be used by humans rather than as an ontological network to which we all belong, Marder succeeds in uncovering a sense of vegetal commonality shared by all earthly beings, inasmuch as they are alive and inasmuch as we understand life as survival. It should be asked however if life limits itself to a pursuit to survival, and if bareness solely is constituted through processes of reproduction, nutrition and relationality. Are there other realms of commonality or spaces of encounters between vegetal and human beings that remain unaddressed by Marder's phenomenology of the vegetal? In his scheme, our common traits remain biological characteristics whose mechanisms function in the realm of instincts. Eating and reproduction, as such articulated, are part of vegetal "ontological indifference," of one's dispersion and dissemination no matter what (135). I contend that a theorization of vegetal agency and relationality should not refuse conceptualism with such insistence as even the very word "vegetal" has conceptual roots, even though at a bare level it goes on living, and so does bareness for that matter. While Marder's

deconstruction of western metaphysics stresses the necessity for a phenomenology of plant-thinking, his insistent refusal of theoretical enquiries that glorifies bareness obscures attempts to find a mode through which human/vegetal conceptualism and bare existence cohabit.

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III. Eating: you are and are not what you eat

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett advocates increased attunement to the vitality of matter, “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). While the notion of vitality endows nonhuman beings or things with capacities of equivalent force than those of humans, it also removes agency from the exclusive domain of the human. Agency rather results from interactive processes. It is distributed: “an actant never really act alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (21). From a vital materialist point of view, it follows, vegetal agency is an assemblage of interactions between plants, but also insects, soil, microorganisms, compost, water, sun and humans. Affect brings actants to form distributive agencies, a commonality that, following Spinoza’s definition, refers to the capacity of any body or object for activity and response. The broader political scope of Bennett’s vital materialism is to find a path for the democratization of human/nonhuman distributed agencies “not the perfect equality of actants but a polity with more channels of communication between members” (104). Provided that linguistic communication is exclusively human, how can actants of different types understand each other? Perhaps the

co-constitution of distributive agencies through mediated affectivity might just be what their communication is all about. The question thus becomes: how can humans/nonhumans relationships be democratized not on the basis of mutual understanding but rather on their ontological condition of co-constitutive meaningless affectivities?

Translating vital materiality into writing is precarious. As agency is distributed among a wide variety of actants, who gets to take part in its interactive assemblages and who is left out? This is a recurrent methodological problem in any theoretical project bequeathed with rhizomatic undertones: where do we put the boundaries around a network so the contingencies of its specific interactions are not overlooked while also engaging with its irreducible multiplicity. Recognizing such ambiguity, Bennett suggests to theorize events, which is exemplified by her book's division in chapters that each examine a specific case, from a blackout to debates about stem cells culture. Restraining analyses to a specific event negotiates the tension between contingencies and multiplicity by acknowledging the position of the writer as arbitrarily constructing an assemblage whose boundaries are fragile. Reifying the writer as a witness of the event also makes her part of the very assemblage she is drawing, a much more sensible approach to human/nonhuman confederations than theories aiming at all-encompassing frameworks, as the very structure of assemblages goes against generalities. I adopt Bennett's methodological concern by framing this essay' theoretical inquiry into the affectivity of trans-species encounters around a specific event, resistance against genetically modified corn. However, as this section will later demonstrate, my conception of what constitutes an event and how to purposefully frame it is distinct from Bennett's.

Edible matter, food, is part of Bennett's constellation of events, which are connected by their common, although contingent, vitality. Edibility is a site in which new assemblages emerge through the meeting of two bodies: food's "connotative body" (containing different actants – nutrients, molecules, genes, etc.) and the eater's body (itself an agglomeration of different actants – organs, nerves, muscles, tissues, genes etc.) (39). Drawing on Nietzsche and Thoreau's conceptions of eating as a powerful agentic event that collides human and nonhuman bodies with one another, resulting in reciprocal entanglements between the bodies of the eater and the eaten, Bennett demonstrates how eating generates a new assemblage: "once ingested, once, that is, food coacts with the hand that places it in one's mouth, with the metabolic agencies of intestines, pancreas, kidneys, with cultural practices of physical exercise and so on, food can generate new human tissue" (40). Eating thus is not really a question of intentionality, as different actants – taste, desire, perceptions, movements, hunger, current mood, as well as the eaten's constitution and cultural connotations – all interact in a way that compose the act of eating. Once ingested, all actants mingle, blurring the limitations between the eater and the eaten's bodies and the very division between organic and inert matter: "human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be added on. Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: my meal both is and is not mine, you both are and are not what you eat" (49). This is reminiscent, Bennett claims, of Deleuze and Guattari's "vagabond quality of matter" (50) wherein each being, organic or inert, is in constant flux and never limited unto itself, constantly undergoing a process of recorporealization through which the assemblages

within which it interacts becomes part of itself. Eating enacts metabolization, a dynamic series of encounters and combinations that testify to each actants' boundless vitality. In the event of eating, humans and nonhumans are never alone, opened to the others beyond their own perceptible delimitations.

This analysis of eating as a process of recorporealization and metabolization between the eater, the eaten and their respective assemblages offers potential tools to rethink the Mayan claim. When eating corn, the human's and the vegetable's bodily boundaries blur; kernels meet with teeth, fibers with gums, sweetness with taste buds, starch with stomach, and so forth, all of which is interconnected and co-constitutive. Each time one eats corn, such powerful encounters take place, giving rise to a new, fluctuating, unbounded assemblage or, following Bennett, only bounded to the event of eating as a specific temporal experience. While this understanding of eating as a rhizomatic network of interactions among alters brings a dynamic angle to our analysis, it seems there remains something particular about the Mayan perspective. After all, such network of interactions is likely to emerge in both Mayan and non-Mayan corn eaters but it certainly is not the case that anyone whose teeth venture in the activity of kernel mastication will come out of the experience with a sense of being corn. While this difference might be due to Mayans' increased attunement to food's vitalism and awareness of the recorporealization the act of eating comprises, it also indicates a broader problem in Bennett's proposition: the temporal closeness of the assemblage unto itself is in tension with the perpetual and continuously renewed self-openness of the eater's and eaten's bodies.

Food belongs to an assemblage that is not, structurally speaking, only limited to the action of eating itself: it comes from somewhere and is heading somewhere else. By limiting the assemblage to the action of eating, Bennett overlooks the production and disposal stages of food's life cycle and the networks of actants engaged in these very phases. The action of eating, in the present, might give rise to a recorporealization between two multispecies bodies, but both also are connotative of where they come from and where they're heading. The eaten body also denotes previous trans-species interactions and recorporealizations between a vast range of actants – plants, insects, soil, compost, microorganisms, cultivators, sun, water, farmers, etc.– and of the ones that will arise post-eating – compost, manure, or dumps. And so it is with the eater herself, whose action of eating is informed by previous experiences – previous meals, physical activity, finances, or involvement in the production of the food eaten, etc. – and future ones – digestion, food sensitivities, effects on energy, satisfactions, etc. Moreover, as eaters generally eat many times a day everyday, the metabolization process unleashed by the act of eating does not only give rise to an eater/eaten encounter, but also to one between the current metabolization and the ones launched by previous meals. Could eating in fact be a perpetual recorporealization that self-renews and varies according to the bodies encountered in each meal, a continuously expanding or shape-shifting assemblage of assemblages?

Bennett's analysis of eating brings back the methodological paradox between contingency and multiplicity: the necessity to bound the assemblage of edibility gets disrupted by its very own unbounded structure. By delimiting the event around edibility, she creates the illusion that food assemblages are always new events, always closed unto

themselves, albeit opened to the multiplicity of encounters happening in the present time experience of eating. In light of such tension, I contend that bounding food assemblages otherwise, around a specific food in a particular context (such as corn, in the context of resistance to agro-biotechnology) instead of around the action of eating, has better chances to avoid overlooking both contingencies and the multiplicity of actants at play in food assemblages. The opening Mayan quote suggests that corn/human assemblages potentially operate through a continual series of recorporealization between each body driven by a series of encounters during their whole lifecycle. Corn is grown, sold, eaten, digested, defecated, composted, its seeds saved, brought back to the soil, grown again, and so forth. Humans are part of corn's life cycle as much as corn is part of their own (Fitting 2011; Kinchy 2012; Menchù, 1984). Throughout all these phases, a multiplicity of actants interact as both are connotative bodies full of their own others. Perpetual, continuous and cyclical meetings between humans and corn entangle them in a series of recorporealization wherein each' bodily assemblage merge into a new one. There might even be no human nor corn anymore, just beings whose ontology displaces vegetal and human actants through distributive agencies characterized by trans-species affectivity.

By the end of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett claims that: "all forces and flows are or can become lively, affective and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it co-exists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces and competes" (117), indicating her recognition that the ways through which humans and nonhumans meet beyond speciation are multiple and obscure radical differences between types. If, following her emphasis, what each actant shares is affect, it seems here that her reliance on Spinoza's conception entangles

humans and nonhumans with one another by simple virtue of being there. But why relate? What brings beings to recorporealize? What is the substance of affect – what does it smell, taste and feel like? The next section complicates Bennett’s use of affect theory to engage trans-species metabolization.

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IV. Observing: the affective ecologies of communication

In “Involutionary Momentum,” science and technology studies scholars Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers engage with scientific analyses of plant/insect relationships as a form of multispecies encounter that include the observer. They advocate that plant/insect interactions should be interpreted beyond a calculating economy of reproductive behavior, as they also compose an affective ecology of intimacies, desires, pleasures, experimentations, in which the interpreter takes part as much as plants and insects do. Using Darwin’s field notes on orchids as a case study, they highlight the passages where we find him confused, confronted with the limits of his evolutionary logic, faced with the circulation of sensibilities, affinities, attractions and intimacies between bees and orchids that reach out to him, affectively entangling him in the ecology he was supposedly observing with objective detachment (79). While Darwin’s evolutionary project could arguably be identified as symptomatic of the broader western metaphysics that conceptualized life as speciation, Hustak and Myers suggest a counter-approach to his writings that opens his logic to trans-species encounters. The “involutionary mode” (77), the name they give to their approach, reads more-than-human ecologies from within by “rolling, curling, turning inwards” (96), embracing the “thickness of the space between bodies, where affects and sensations are transduced

through excitable tissues” (78), the possibilities of “relationality and becoming with and across difference” (96), “life happening now, and now, and now” (97), and the “affective push and pull among bodies, including the affinities, ruptures, enmeshments, and repulsions among organisms” (97).

Like Bennett, Hustak and Myers are not only concerned with the vitality of nonhuman individuals, but more precisely with the ways in which it leads to trans-species encounters, paying attention to what happens between bodies and to beings’ mutual becoming with, alongside and through one another. Moving away from concerns with nonhumans’ otherness to concerns with the encounter value of their interaction opens the possibility that each actant’s bodily boundaries mingle, that affectivity outshines physical delimitations, that at a certain point there is just too much vitality and circulation to perceive contours. An involutory approach counteracts speciation in favor of circulation, metabolization and networked encounters. Human beings, just like any other beings, potentially partake of such ecologies as is demonstrated by their inclusion of Darwin within the orchids/bees affective network he is analyzing, and as Myers’ sensorial botanical *kryia* to “awaken the latent plant in you” (Myers 2014) suggests in yogic terms. Hustak and Myers’ involutory approach also supplements Bennett’s vital materialism by complicating the role of affect within trans-species recorporealization. Affect here does not only refer to a capacity to interact, but more precisely to mechanisms of interactions driven by intimacies, desires, repulsions, affinities, play, pleasure, disgust, and so forth. Such a move reconciles affect theory and its emphasis on Spinoza’s conception with the popular understanding of the word as referring to emotionality – affect is not

just a mechanistic and/or unconscious drive for interaction, but a set of substantial felt processes shared by earthly beings.

Involutionary readings also raise methodological considerations since trans-species affectivity reach to the interpreter, invited to integrate the ecology at hand by letting her senses be “attuned to stories told in otherwise muted registers” (77). To follow the plants, one must “dive into the soil, mingle with symbiotic fungi and microbes, converse with insects, and be lured along with other plants cultivator, only some of which are humans” (81). This is a call to engage with nonhuman others beyond thinking and writing, or rather for letting thinking and writing be informed by encounters with nonhumans through affective attunement to their otherness. In the case of an inquiry into vegetal agency, this is to be conducted through lived experiences within the multispecies plant world: grow a garden, save seeds, compost, collect wild fruits and vegetables. Let this become your research method (frame it as ethnography if you wish) and let your research become life. Thinking, reading, writing mingle with sensing, feeling, and integrating, asking us to listen, respond, and be alert to the diversity of others encountered in the process. This is far from a call to more science-based approaches, but rather for more experientially grounded analyses as leaving the observer outside the ecology she is studying risks reiterating anthropocentrism. Let’s instead recognize our integration to more-than-human assemblages by actually integrating them. I share Hustak and Myer’s concern for sensorial and affective experiences of vegetal encounters, and as my hands are typing these words with a view upon one of this year first snowfalls of Montreal’s reputedly harsh winters, they certainly are starting to miss the feelings of diving into fresh soil or compost, of meticulously manipulating seeds and of harvesting the small number

of fruits and vegetables that succeed to grow out of the somewhat unstable conditions of my urban garden.

To what extent the poetic, sensible and cryptic characters of such experiences can be rendered through linguistic writing and translated into a scholarly piece of literature? Could it be that sensible experiences of an affective ecology and its academic expression are held in tension through a third equivocation, building upon the already mentioned double-sided equivocation between the perspectives of Westerns and Mayans, and of humans and plants? Following Viveiros de Castro:

The equivocation is not that which impedes the relation, but that which founds and impels it: a difference in perspective. To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocity – the essential similarity – between what the Other and We are saying.

(2004, 8)

Writing thus becomes an act of translation, a process that communicates through differences while quivering both perspectives in making them meet – in this case, gardening becomes post-structuralist and the scholar's hands dirty with mud and manure. The involutory momentum is the equivocation itself, when “affectual multiplicity” (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 7) is disclosed, recognized as flows of ones and others substantially interacting on the basis of their distinct misunderstandings. Translation as communication does not only drive the perspectival shock between affective experimentalism and academic language, but also the double-sided equivocations between humanity and vegetality and between Mayans and Westerners.

The intense affective circulations entangling humans, plants, insects and their related species with one another, Hustak and Myers claim, is an event of communication (100-105), thus of networked translations between a multiplicity of perspectival positions. They use communication as a structure to theorize vegetal distributed agencies, partly for distinguishing inquiries into vegetal life from animal studies whose reliance on communication theory depends on animals' mutual capacity to lock eyes with one another. This absence of "cécité réciproque" between animals leads many scholars to analyze their inter-species encounters through the lens of semiotic communication theories that position actants as recursively sender and receiver of interpretable signs (80-81, 100-105). As vegetal encounters lack such perceptual reciprocity, exchanges between actants rather function through networked, affective, and material disseminations leading to continual dynamic recorporealizations. The circulation of substantial affects becomes what communication is all about, a set of meaningless, disseminated, dynamic, and networked material exchanges between a vast arrays of co-existing beings. Vegetal communication forms a trans-species ecology, of which humans, insects, soil, microorganisms, water and so forth take part, entangling with one another up to a point where: "we don't know what a signal is or what it can do, let alone what constitutes cross-species communication" (104).

In the vegetal world, plants are notable communicators as they:

are alchemists who turn sunlight and carbon dioxide into volatile utterances and innovate forms of atmospheric media amenable for long-distance expression. They are artisans who craft mimetically responsive anatomies. They are also keenly attuned sensors whose bodies can register

the subtlest difference in temperature, the slightest brush of the wing of a passing insect, and who can discern small differences in herbivores by detecting distinct substances in their saliva. Their roots and rhizomes form a network of connections as complex as an animal's nervous system, and they move actively in response to their ever changing world. (104)

Such analysis is not isolating plants from their trans-species ecologies but rather brings the authors to enter into the plant's perspective through the work of equivocation, as "equivocation appears here as the mode of communication par excellence between different perspectival positions" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 5). Venturing in the other's perspective through their own, the authors emphasize the willingness of plants to embrace the work of an inherently multiple equivocation, their openness to a self-perspectival disruption through the encounters of insects', soil's, sun's, microorganisms' perspectives – and so do Hustak and Myers themselves with their own human perspective. Is there a point however where the translation stops translating, where communication through differences becomes communication through indivisibility, where the multiplicity of perspectives merge into an absence of perspectives, where misunderstandings no longer persist? The affective ecology of communication leaves no choice but to admit that the multiple becomes one precisely because it is multiple. The one and the others have metabolized. They are as much distinct as they are the same. We might be corn and the corn might be us precisely because we are human and because corn is corn. We can ontologically be the same, translate our very beings into one another, all part of an irreducible communicative ecology driven by flows of recorporealization and substantial affectivities precisely because we are able to crawl back into speciation and

perspectival positions, because we can continuously reiterate the gap, because we can misunderstand the other, because we can be different as much as we can be the same.

§

V. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that networked circulations of affects between arrays of beings constitute a form of communication through which humans and plants meet and mingle, becoming trans-species companions. Unlike inter-species relationships, whose interactions depend on each actant's stabilized speciation, trans-species encounters rather dissolve physical boundaries and undermine conceptual delimitations through series of ontological recorporealizations. Agamben's critique of metaphysical speciation, Marder's discovery of earthlings' vegetal roots, Bennett's attention to edibility that position vital-material agency as a motor of recorporealizations between bodies, and Hustak and Myers' engagement with trans-species affective ecologies as a form of communication, all offer different paths to explore and sustain this argument. Could it be however that leaps into the un-speciated are stirred by the others' otherness, that it is because a delimited self perceive others as others that their encounters blur delimitations, that one can become multiple as much as it can become one? Could it be in fact that an adventure in the realm of more-than-human affects does not fully contradict our metaphysics of delimitations? After all, no plant is going to read this paper, but this does not mean that these words have not met with plants. Maybe is it just that speciation and trans-speciation are two distinct but co-existing modes of being, in which case the only form of tyranny would be in prioritizing one of these modes by dismissing the other as mere spirituality or cultural belief, and not leaving any room for their coexistence.

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