

**The Virtue of the Green: Plant Agency and Interspecies Communion in Mary
Oliver's *Devotions* (2017)****Dang Thi Thai Ha**✉

Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 19 June 2026 Approved 07 July 2026 Published 31 July 2026	This article conducts a close reading of Mary Oliver's poetry collection, <i>Devotions</i> (2017), to elucidate a novel ecological ethic regarding trees and an interspecies love that transcends the confines of human-centric and anthropomorphic frameworks. While anthropocentric perspectives assert human supremacy through the exclusive possession of soul and intellect, Oliver destabilizes these assumptions. She hypothesizes the existence of plant souls and replaces traditional cognition with a value system rooted in 'plant virtue,' a concept that compels humans to question their own ontological hierarchy. This virtue of plants serves as a central thesis in her work, leading to a critical interrogation of dominant human practices, such as the consumption of vegetation. Finally, the article explores the vivid interspecies affection in Oliver's oeuvre, specifically through the lens of queering the non-human. Her poetic engagement with flora opens new possibilities for human sexuality and intimacy with the botanical world. To substantiate these claims, this study employs the theoretical framework of plant humanities , conceptualized as a novel ecocritical approach aimed at dismantling the anthropocentric hierarchies often imposed upon the botanical realm. Furthermore, it utilizes the lens of " queering the non-human "—as articulated by scholars such as Giffney & Hird and Luciano & Chen—to elucidate how Oliver's poetry envisions deeply "queer," affective, and more hopeful modes of empathetic kinship with plant life.
Keywords: botanical world, ecological ethics, queering the non-human, eco-erotic with the flora, posthumanism	

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INTRODUCTION

The bias of conceptualizing plants as an 'alien' Other, as highlighted by numerous ecocritics, is embedded not only within scientific and philosophical discourse, but also within the very foundations of environmental thought and activism (Gagliano, Ryan, & Vieira, 2017; Laist, 2013). Although literature is a sphere we might assume to have been intimately connected to vegetal imagination since its inception, Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira (2017) point out that the literary canon (particularly in the West) has historically failed to transcend its "appropriations of, and

conventions and biases toward" the world of flora (p. x). It often reduces plant life to "the landscape or as the backdrop for human and, on occasion, animal dramas"; as a result, "the mysterious intricacies of vegetal lives, obscure to the human subject, are largely cast aside and relegated to narrative blind spots in a wide array of literary works" (Gagliano et al., 2017, p. x). Furthermore, these botanical "blind spots" are being increasingly exacerbated by the process of modernization; or, as Randy Laist posits, we are confronted with the phenomenon of "the defoliation of the cultural imagination" (Laist, 2013, p. 10). As Laist (2013) observes, flora—despite having once "played a

✉ Corresponding author:

Email: hadtt.iol@vass.gov.vn

p-ISSN: 2252-6323

e-ISSN: 2721-4540

crucial role in the formative myths of all cultures”—has become increasingly scarce “in the cultural canon of the contemporary West” (p. 11). Plant blindness is vividly manifested in the fact that, parallel to the disappearance of diverse plant species from human habitats, there is a concurrent erosion of their names. A vast portion of the lexicon and shared knowledge regarding plants that figures like Wordsworth or Whitman once naturally assumed their readership possessed has now become entirely alien and inconceivable to the contemporary individual (Laist, 2013 p. 10). If we reflect upon current products of popular culture, how many plant species can we still discern, and how many can we personally identify by name, beyond those—such as the rose—that have been ‘subsumed’ by mass media and consumer culture? Plant blindness has, perhaps, never been more acute.

Yet, even amidst this “defoliation of the cultural imagination,” Laist (2013) contends that we are fortunate to still possess poetry (p. 11). Mary Oliver, as Laist (2013) himself observes, emerges as one of the rare figures of our era who “fights a rearguard action against encroaching mental defoliation” (p. 11), utilizing her poetry to resist the phenomenon of plant blindness. While plant blindness refers to the human incapacity to recognize the presence and vital role of flora within our immediate environment, Mary Oliver—through both her poetry and prose—gives names to these botanical species, continuously invoking the existence (or past existence) of even the most minute flowers and leaves. If plant blindness constitutes a deficit in the ability to see and “consider plants as living beings” (Torres-Porras & Alcántara-Manzanares, 2021, p. 128), Oliver, by contrast, perceives the vital sap coursing through every grain of wood and branch, listening as roots shift to embrace and exchange life within the soil. Furthermore, whereas plants are often dismissed as insentient and incapable of communication, Oliver’s poetry emerges from an observation of how flora harmonize, protect, provide, and interconnect—not only with one another but also with the surrounding living organisms in their ecosystem. While grasses (especially those

relegated to the status of ‘weeds’) often fall into an even deeper abyss within this botanical blindness, Oliver reveres their vitality, deriving profound lessons from every blade. Finally, if the taxonomic gaze—a byproduct of the ascendancy of science—tends to view plants merely as representatives of a species while neglecting the individual, Oliver reminds us of the singular uniqueness of each entity. For Oliver, individuality is not an exclusive human prerogative. In the essay “Upstream,” she observes that flora share with humanity “a general outline, then the stunning individual strokes” (Oliver, 2016, p. 3). Rejecting the alienating detachment of taxonomic classification, Oliver bestows personal names—like “Archibald Violet”—upon plants, rescuing their singularity from species-level abstraction. This individualization invites profound corporeal communion. By “hugging” and “putting [her] lips to” trees to elicit a somatic response, Oliver models a trans-species intimacy that subverts traditional anthropocentrism (Oliver, 2016, pp. 3-6).

The prerequisite for this connection, and the antidote to plant blindness, is “attention,” which Oliver posits as “the beginning of devotion” (Oliver, 2016, p. 8). Such reverent observation steers humanity away from ecological exploitation, challenging us to abandon our “vainglory” to “salvage” the earth “from the lords of profit” (pp. 7-8). Fittingly, her 2017 retrospective collection, *Devotions*, codifies this lifelong trajectory: a poetics fundamentally structured by a radical, protective communion with the botanical world. This article, therefore, focuses on analyzing the poems in Oliver’s collection *Devotions* through the lens of plant humanities. In doing so, it demonstrates how Oliver utilizes poetry to dismantle the pervasive hegemonic relationships humans have continually imposed upon the vegetal realm. These impositions manifest in language, ideology, and utilitarian practices—such as the reduction of plants to mere sustenance, or the elevation of humans on an axiological hierarchy that dismisses plant life as entities devoid of spirit, soul, or intellect. Concurrently, through the deconstruction of this binary hierarchy, Oliver’s poetry proposes alternative paradigms of

relationality, fostering a profound respect, affection, and empathetic communion with the world's vegetal beings.

METHODS

Grounded in an ecocritical framework, this article rereads literary texts through the lens of plant humanities. It demonstrates that plants do more than simply “play a vital role in the experience of being human”—a concept reflecting our long history of utilizing flora, wherein our very existence since primordial times has been inextricably bound to and dependent upon vegetation. Beyond this, the text asserts that humans must acknowledge plant agency. It emphasizes how plants “live among us as fellow species,” possessing their own distinct lives, languages, voices, and emotions; the lingering question is merely whether humans possess the capacity to listen to them (Laist, 2013, p. 1).

Furthermore, from an ecocritical perspective, Manes (1996) posits that the prerequisite for humanity to exert absolute dominance over the natural world is, first and foremost, the systematic reduction of nature to a state of voiceless silence. In his essay *Nature and Silence*, Manes (1996) demonstrates a profound skepticism toward human linguistic systems, stating: “our particular idiom, a pastiche of medieval hermeneutics and Renaissance humanism, with its faith in reason, intellect and progress, has created an immense realm of silences, a world of ‘not saids’ called nature, obscured in global claims of eternal truths about human difference, rationality, and transcendence” (p. 17). Among natural entities, plants are arguably driven into this realm of silence more frequently and profoundly than any others (particularly in comparison to animals). This marginalization parallels the exponential growth and expansion of human civilization, thereby naturalizing the unmitigated instrumentalization and maximal exploitation of the botanical world. Plants are routinely relegated to an inferior status—perceived as possessing less subjectivity and intelligence, and as entirely lacking a soul, spirit, or language.

Indeed, as Laist (2013) observes, contemporary humanity struggles profoundly even to acknowledge “their status as animate organisms” (p. 12). Viewed through this lens, Oliver’s poetic corpus operates as a counter-discourse, problematizing the ideological apparatuses that systematically privilege anthropocentrism. In turn, she establishes an alternative metric of ‘virtue’ that humanity can scarcely rival. Plants, by virtue of their ontological existence, are devoid of egotism; they continuously bestow life upon other species, just as they endlessly provision humanity with oxygen and breathable air (Irigaray, 2017, p. 126).

Furthermore, this paper employs the framework of ‘queering the Non/Human’ to examine how Oliver proposes novel kinships with flora—specifically, an interspecies love with vegetal beings. The hybridization and capacity for ‘becoming’ facilitated by the act of ‘queering’ are inherently non-normative; they forge unsanctioned relationalities and, consequently, pose recalcitrant challenges to epistemological foundations (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 4). Building upon these provocations, the act of ‘queering’ gesture defies the “prohibited intercourse” between nature and culture (Kirby, 2008, p. 50). In Oliver’s case, this manifests in how her poetry transgresses the taboos surrounding eroticism, love, and communion between humans and the vegetal world, thereby unveiling new connective possibilities for our shared existence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Virtue of Plants as a Novel Ecological Axiological System

Central to the re-evaluation of human transcendence is Oliver’s deliberate departure from an anthropocentric perspective, through which she interrogates the various rationales frequently invoked to justify human superiority over botanical species. A primary example is consciousness—a category of such paramount concern that it is often regarded as the highest manifestation of life possessed by humanity. It is routinely cited to demonstrate the perceived inferiority of plants relative to animals and humans; as Hegel (as cited

in Gagliano et al., 2017) posits: “plants are unable to preserve ‘inwardly the unity of the self,’ that is, to return to themselves, and, thus, do not evince the subjectivity and inwardness that animals display *in nuce* and that is then fully developed in human self-consciousness” (p. ix). While the proposition of plant consciousness remains a contested subject within both contemporary philosophy and science (Baker, 2017), Oliver seems to pose a more incisive inquiry. Rather than merely attempting to prove that plants possess a ‘consciousness’ that would grant them ontological parity with humans, she interrogates the very necessity of such a comparison. What if plants do not share a human-like consciousness? Such a lack does not render them any less noble or sublime; indeed, for the poet, the botanical world appears perhaps even more radiant and dignified, as seen in her poem “Goldenrod”:

On roadsides,
in fall fields,
in rumpy bunches,
saffron and orange and pale gold,
in little towers, soft as mash,
sneeze-bringers and seed-bearers,
full of bees and yellow beads and perfect
flowerlets
and orange butterflies.
I don’t suppose
much notice comes of it, except for honey,
and how it heartens the heart with its
blank blaze.
I don’t suppose anything loves it except,
perhaps,
the rocky voids
filled by its dumb dazzle. (Oliver, 2017, p. 283)

This, too, is a botanical species that garners little human regard—burdened even by irritants that provoke sneezing—yet, observe the manner in which it cradles life (bearing seeds) and exists in communion (teeming with bees and butterflies). Behold the lithe elegance of those forms swaying with the wind, the consummate perfection of each minute floret as it serenely bestows its fragrance and nectar “in the pure peace” (Oliver, 2017, p. 281). Is this not already a life whole, abundant, and radiant, requiring no appeal to “the consciousness

of brained organisms” (Ryan, 2017, p. 291) to further justify its intrinsic worth? From this vantage, Oliver posits an antithesis of consciousness: “And what has consciousness come to anyway, so far, / that is better than these light-filled bodies?” (Oliver, 2017, p. 284).

While the “immortal soul” is frequently invoked as an “alleged quality” used to artificially elevate humanity above nature (Garrard, 2004, p. 23), Oliver dismantles this anthropocentric dogma. She decentralizes fixed paradigms of the spirit by recognizing the Divine within the wider plurality of non-human existence. In “Some questions you might ask,” Oliver systematically interrogates the exclusivity of the soul. Pondering its shape and distribution, she extends spiritual consideration to the animal and vegetal realms, pointedly asking, “Why should I have it, and not the anteater,” before ultimately shifting her reverence to the botanical world: “what about the maple trees? / What about the blue iris? / [...] / What about the grass?” (Oliver, 2017, p. 313).

A relentless succession of inquiries has rendered the long-standing presupposition of the soul as an exclusively human attribute more precarious than ever before. In its wake, a multitude of alternative possibilities for the ‘soul’ have emerged. What compels humanity to conceptualize such an invisible entity, assert its immortality, and deny its presence in all non-human existences? The reason, as Erica Fudge astutely observes, merely “betrays an anxious, self-defeating need to construct and continually reinforce a difference that nature has not supplied, so that our dominionist beliefs and practices may continue unmolested” (as cited in Garrard, 2004, p. 143). To interrogate the nature of the soul is, therefore, to dismantle a core rhetoric that humanity clings to in order to rationalize its own unethical conduct toward non-human beings. Oliver’s verses are, in truth, as gentle and intimate yet as unyielding as blades of grass. She de-centers us from metaphysical abstractions, directing our gaze toward the vividness of individual existence—even those most minute and silenced, such as a single leaf, a blossom, or a humble stone. Should we but relinquish the ‘ego’ and renounce the

metaphysical constructs that sustain human narcissism, we might perceive the vital spirit within all things; spirits that perhaps do not exist in isolation, but are inextricably woven into the material fabric. They may well possess form and weight—beings to be beheld, touched, and felt in every pulse and heaving breath. Once we attune ourselves to the raw, teeming souls of the myriad beings surrounding us, how can we continue to callously efface that world, or expropriate their lives for the sake of our own convenience and profit? As in Irigaray's words, "to stop for gazing at a tree can grant us a soul, in the original sense of the soul, and that experience can bring us back to a living soul, made of energy, breath, memory, gratitude, which thus correspond both to a gathering with ourselves and being in communion with the living." (Irigaray, 2017, p. 131)

Yet, the somber reality remains that "Nature," as Christopher Manes (1996) observes, has for too long been relegated to "an immense realm of silences," a "world of 'not saids'" within a cultural framework predicated upon "medieval hermeneutics and Renaissance humanism." This mindset is inextricably bound to a "faith in reason, intellect and progress" and a perpetual reaffirmation of "eternal truths about human difference, rationality, and transcendence" (p. 17). Has intelligence—or intellect—not been incessantly underscored as the foundational attribute defining "human value" and asserting the supreme status of humanity? Oliver does not employ poetry as an extension of scientific discourse—itsself fundamentally rooted in the intellect—regarding whether flora possess intelligence and, if so, the specific manifestations it might take. As with the enigmas of the soul and consciousness, Oliver neither pursues nor asserts a definitive resolution concerning the intellect of plant life. Rather, she offers a divergent inquiry: Granted, for the sake of argument, that plants may lack human-like intelligence—but what, then, of their virtue? It is exactly this question that she interrogates in "Beans":

"I know what you think: this is foolishness. They're only vegetables. Even the blossoms with which they begin are small and pale,

hardly significant. Our hands, or minds, our feet hold more intelligence. With this I have no quarrel.

But, what about virtue?" (Oliver, 2017, p. 184)

Oliver acknowledges the deep-seated prejudices and the fortress-like disdain with which humanity views the botanical world—specifically those organisms relegated to the category of "vegetables." To be classified as a "vegetable" is to be functionally calcified, reduced strictly to an object of human consumption. It is to be deemed aesthetically insufficient, unworthy of the contemplative gaze or genuine admiration. Regarding intellect, Oliver concedes that these "edible plants" may never rival even "our hands" or "our feet," much less the complexity of our brain. Yet, must the metric of a being's existential worth be predicated solely upon intellect? And does our own intelligence—though exalted as being "how like a god" (Shakespeare, 2026, p. 103)—truly guarantee us a virtue superior to that of the flora? Can intellect ever serve as the foundational nourishment of life itself? If virtue were the primary measure of a species' value, where then would humanity fall upon that hierarchy? Oliver eschews the strain of polemics against claims of human supremacy; she simply reminds us that it is virtue which bestows a sense of nobility upon every existence. And is that not the most precious quality of all? What becomes of humanity when it possesses the fullness of consciousness and intellect, yet suffers the loss of virtue? Ultimately, when viewed through this new paradigm of value, is it not time for us to learn the art of humility—to bow, rather than stand in haughty superiority before the plant kingdom, even toward those species we have hitherto dismissed as mere sustenance for our daily meals?

This proposition of 'virtue' is a recurring motif throughout Oliver's poetry; through this conceptual framework, the botanical world—even in its most infinitesimal forms—is no longer perceived as "hardly significant" (Oliver, 2017, p. 184). Conversely, by reorienting our perspective toward virtue, Oliver compels us to recognize the inherent beauty and significance of these

existences, both in relation to our daily lives and to our aesthetic pursuits and aspirations for the sublime, as exemplified in her poem “Evidence”: “Beauty without purpose is beauty without virtue./ But all beautiful things, inherently, have this function—/ to excite the viewers toward sublime thought” (Oliver, 2017, p. 80). Is this not the very meditation offered to us when we contemplate the flowers? Does not every calyx brim with virtue as it fosters “sublime” thoughts—facilitating a transcendence of mundane necessities, a wellspring of inspiration, and a soaring passion that yet remains inextricably tethered to life? This botanical beauty, as Oliver discerned while wandering among the flora, is a grace that humanity cannot easily attain, as illustrated in her poem “From the Book of Time”: “And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening / is the real work. / Maybe the world, without us, / is the real poem” (Oliver, 2017, p. 234). This somber yet undeniable contemplation of humanity—those who boastfully proclaim themselves the masters of the world—is a recurring motif in Oliver’s poetry. To what powers have we surrendered, and how deeply have we been corrupted, that we no longer constitute a part of the world’s inherent beauty? These sentiments seemingly reflect the underlying philosophical musings of the poem “October”:

Sometimes in late summer I won’t touch
anything, not
the flowers, not the blackberries
brimming in the thickets; I won’t drink
from the pond; I won’t name the birds or the
trees;
I won’t whisper my own name.
One morning
the fox came down the hill, glittering and
confident,
and didn’t see me—and I thought:
so this is the world.
I’m not in it.
It is beautiful (Oliver, 2017, p. 310).

Yet, more fundamentally, Oliver posits that the botanical world is never merely a beauty intended for ornamentation or passive spectatorship; rather, it is a realm of radical unashamedness. In the poem “Yes! No!,” the

agency and uncompromising self-assertion of flora are manifest in the image of the satisfied “spotted trout lilies standing a few inches above the earth,” while a serene certainty in its own *raison d’être* is glimpsed through the plum tree “holding its white petals” (Oliver, 2017, p. 264). Distinct from the pervasive guilt that haunts human consciousness, plants exist in their absolute suchness—an existence that remains forever sinless (“The catbrier is without fault”). Thus, to witness the fullness of virtue in the plant kingdom is both an exercise in intellectual and moral humility and a profound curriculum for our own survival.

Queering the Non-human: Becoming-Plant and Interspecies Love with the Vegetal

As previously analyzed, Oliver’s verse actively destabilizes “boundaries in its challenging of binaries pertaining to nature/culture, living/dead,” “subject/object, presence/absence and human/nonhuman” (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 2). This “queer” trajectory toward the nonhuman is rendered even more apparent when considering the dimension of desire. If the term “queer” “comes to signify the continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 4), the gesture of “queering” entails an effort toward dismantling normative boundaries and stereotypical conceptions to open up unforeseen possibilities of existence and connection. In relation to the question of humanity, “queering the non-human” prompts a perpetual reimagining of the human, rendering the human form, the ontological framework of humanity, and its traditional structures of desire fundamentally indeterminate. Such a ‘queering’ impulse is unmistakably present in Mary Oliver’s poetry concerning the vegetal world, where she expresses not only a yearning to become, to metamorphose, and to live the life of plants, but also vividly articulates erotic desires directed toward them.

If the hybridity and the capacity for ‘becoming’ enacted by the ‘queer’ maneuver are inherently resistant to normativity—establishing non-legitimized relations and, consequently, frequently “perversely challenging the very

epistemological ground”—then the possibilities of ‘becoming-plant’ posited by Oliver in her poetry truly possess the potential to unsettle what Vicky Kirby characterizes as “humanist precepts” (2008, p. 35). Whereas the notion of “the Human” is constructed “through a web of discourses and norms, [and] operates not just descriptively but also prescriptively and proscriptively” (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 7), Oliver, in the poem “The world I live in,” conversely, consistently refuses to “docilely” adhere to such imperatives and categorizations, orienting herself toward alternative possibilities of existence: “I have refused to live/ locked in the orderly house of / reasons and proofs./ The world I live in and believe in/ is wider than that. And anyway,/ what’s wrong with Maybe?” (Oliver, 2017, p. 5). For Oliver, as articulated in (“The Other Kingdoms,” the process of living constitutes a perpetual transgression of the boundaries demarcating the human from the non-human; it is, in other words, a trajectory of becoming: “Thus the world/ grows rich, grows wild, and you too,/ grow rich, grow sweetly wild, as you too/ were born to be” (Oliver, 2017, p. 93). Consequently, ‘queering’ into the vegetative in Oliver’s poetics is inseparable from a reconceptualization of the materiality of existence. Furthermore, it beckons us to transcend categorical classifications in favor of multispecies entanglements, dissolving the illusion of a hermetic and self-sufficient human identity to cultivate a more harmonious communion with nature—one that promises more vibrant possibilities for existence.

Rejecting the “anthropomorphic allure” (Grimes, cited in Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 2) and refusing to uphold the humanist paradigms that preserve her status as an apex species, Oliver opts for a process of metamorphosis, choosing to map her own existence onto the non-human entities surrounding her. Furthermore, if queering is understood as a continuous process, we witness this perpetual state of “becoming” throughout Oliver’s poetry. As evidenced in the poem “Life Story,” for example: “When I lived under the black oaks/ I felt I was made of leaves./ When I lived by Little Sister Pond,/ I dreamed I was the feather of

the blue heron left on the shore;/ I was the pond lily, my root delicate as an artery, my face like a star,/ my happiness brimming” (Oliver, 2017, p. 54). In Oliver’s conceptualization, the body is not a fixed entity but is inherently fluid, teeming with the latent possibilities of becoming. These capacities for morphological transformation and material transmutation recur throughout Oliver’s oeuvre, as evidenced in “Roses, Late Summer”: “If I had another life / I would want to spend it all on some unstinting happiness. / I would be a fox, or a tree full of waving branches. / I wouldn’t mind being a rose in a field full of roses.” (Oliver, 2017, p. 323). For Oliver, ‘becoming-plant’ represents an aspirational state, as it affords the opportunity to exist fully within the vitality of one’s own being. This transformation enables a primal appreciation for the joy found in every breeze and the surrounding material world, while simultaneously shedding the superfluous preoccupations with mortality that haunt the human psyche and cause us to neglect the very life we possess: “Fear has not yet occurred to them, nor ambition. / Reason they have not yet thought of. / Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what. / Or any other foolish question” (Oliver, 2017, p. 323). Consequently, to become a tree is to transcend into a more sapient mode of existence. In this sense, to adopt the state of a plant is to attain a more profound and enlightened form of being.

If one conceptualizes life as a perpetual cycle of material transformation, then even death ceases to be an object of dread or despair. On the contrary, death manifests as a threshold, opening onto entirely new modes of material existence for which one has long yearned. This rejection of the human form, coupled with the desire to be fully exchanged for a vegetal state of being, is perhaps nowhere as explicit or resolute as in the poetry of Mary Oliver. Consider, for instance, the poem “Just lying on the grass at Blackwater”:

I think sometimes of the possible glamour of death—
that it might be wonderful to be
lost and happy inside the green grass
or to be the green grass!—
or, maybe the pink rose, or the blue iris,

or the affable daisy, or the twirled vine
looping its way skyward" (Oliver, 2017, p.
163).

Could the ecstatic joy found in the fantasy of 'becoming-grass' arise from a profound exhaustion with her cumbersome corporeality, the metaphysical ideologies of transcendence, and the normative constraints she is compelled to inhabit? Or does it perhaps stem from a rejection of the violence wrought by a humanity obsessed with 'the ideal of the bounded individual, the integral 'self'' (Bersani, cited in Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 187)? It is also possible that 'becoming-grass' represents a means of attaining a mode of existence in stark opposition to a civilization preoccupied with profit and exploitation—a system that has sacrificed its primordial vitality and its capacity for communion with the natural world. To "take off my shoes and my socks, my jacket, my hat, and go on happier, through the fields," and thus transform into grass or a bough, is to reclaim that lost harmony: "that it might be perfectly peaceful/ to be the shining lake [...] or the dark shoulders of the trees/ where the thrush each evening weeps himself into an ecstasy" (Oliver, 2017, p. 163). Ultimately, the transition to the vegetal state serves as a gateway to the 'virtues' of flora—a possibility for interweaving, interdependence, and profound communion. For Oliver, becoming-other and embracing the subhuman serve as a definitive renunciation of anthropocentric power. This transition facilitates a "line of flight"—an escape from the overshadowing reach of patriarchal authority (as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 14)—allowing her to immerse herself in a state of profound co-existence, as exemplified in the poem "From West Wind":

If there is life after the earth-life, will you
come with me?
Even then? Since we're bound to be
something, why not
together. Imagine! Two little stones, two fleas
under the
wing of a gull, flying along through the fog!
Or, ten blades
of grass. Ten loops of honeysuckle, all flung
against each

other, at the edge of Race Road! (Oliver,
2017, p. 258)

To become vegetal, to occupy the margins, and to orient oneself toward the possibility of coexistence—these objectives in Mary Oliver's poetry constitute what Donna Haraway describes as an urgent capacity that humanity must acquire amidst the current global environmental crisis. The epoch we must strive to cultivate, Haraway (2016) asserts, is the Chthulucene, wherein we learn "to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (p. 2). Oliver's choice to 'become' flora—to align herself with the beings most easily dismissed by human taxonomies and to share the plight of the lowliest—serves as her method of "making kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). Such an enactment of 'becoming' and 'making kin' is often signaled at the very outset of her work, as seen in the title: "Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches." This poem functions as an ontological call for metamorphosis, beckoning the reader to 'step into' the life-world of plant bodies, represented here by the tree limbs. This process of becoming yields fresh sensations of interspecies harmony and the intricate entanglements that bind all living beings: "Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches/ of other lives—/ tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey,/ hanging/ from the branches of the young locust trees, in early summer,/ feel like?" (Oliver, 2017, p. 245). While death may facilitate the shedding of the human form to fully realize 'becoming the Other,' the act of 'becoming the Other' during one's lived existence is, for Oliver, by no means impossible. The crux of the matter is whether we possess the resolve to resist humanist complacency and dare to cultivate alternative imaginings of our own material existence. On numerous occasions, such as in the poem "Evidence," Oliver has urgently emphasized the vital significance of imagination: "Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable" (Oliver, 2017, p. 80). This unlocking of the imagination—the courage to conceptualize existence differently—inevitably

leads to the material practices of becoming. It manifests as the capacity to inhabit the life of flora and the willingness to renounce the arrogant posture of standing upright in order to sit, to lie down, and to transmute oneself into a weed: “To sit down, like a weed among weeds, and rustle in the wind!” (Oliver, 2017, p. 246).

The pleasure and bliss derived from ‘becoming-vegetal’ are frequently characterized by Oliver as an ecstatic state of transcendence. For instance, she depicts a rapturous sensation upon breaching the rigidly maintained boundaries that demarcate the human subject. She touches the inherent fragility of that demarcation, sensing its dissolution through her own physical presence after a night spent sleeping in a field, where “green energy” (Oliver, 2017, p. 296) from the earth and flora permeates and transforms her physical form. Consider the following lines in the poem “White flowers”:

Never in my life had I felt so plush,
or so slippery,
or so resplendently empty.
Never in my life
had I felt myself so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with and the
roots and the stems and the flowers began
(Oliver, 2017, p. 296).

In place of inviolability, the ‘porosity’ of our material bodies and the fragility of the borders we often invoke to assert our superiority are laid bare. Yet, it is precisely in this moment that Oliver perceives most clearly the “links” we may share with other “marginalized subjects” to the land, “not just symbolically but materially” (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 186). This visceral reconnection with “the land”—a vegetal form of kinship—affords the becoming-subject a sense of sublimation and a burgeoning of vitality, as she senses pure white blossoms unfolding from within her own body. Hardly any awakening could be more resplendent or fulfilling: “When I woke / the morning light was just slipping / in front of the stars, / and I was covered / with blossoms” (Oliver, 2017, p. 295). The phantasm of arboreal metamorphosis and blossoming is a motif later

revisited in a work that no less vehemently repudiates the violence inherent in ‘being human’: Han Kang’s novel, *The Vegetarian* (2007/2015). Specifically, this is manifested in the sequence where Han Kang depicts her protagonist escaping a psychiatric institution to stand denuded at the forest’s edge among the trees, yearning for a transformation into a tree so that she might eventually bloom. In this context, ‘blossoming’ signifies not merely a sublimation of the physical form, but an invitation toward the nascent possibilities of communion.

“Pink Moon, the Pond” is likewise an extraordinary poem by Oliver concerning the phenomenology of becoming-plant, becoming-non-human, becoming-sub-human, and becoming-marginalized. It constitutes a renunciation of the human form and the rational order—a refusal of “a single shape” of human (Oliver, 2017, p. 54)—in order to diversify one’s existence toward the infinite and to embrace a new state of being in which individual life is inextricably bound to the entire material world of the non-human. In this poem, Oliver’s praxis of rejecting the human form involves descending into the dark waters of the pond, amidst the resonance of other “tribes,” so that the “soul” may be liberated from the constraints of an andro-anthropocentric framework. This liberation does not entail a dismissal of one’s own materiality; rather, it involves a more profound insight into that materiality—the capacity to “turns into mud and leaves”—and an amalgamation with the perpetual vitality of which we are but a single fiber within that “one long muscle” (Oliver, 2017, p. 120). It is precisely within this process of becoming that lived experiences are maximized and the capacity for audition is expanded to encompass the voices of all non-human natural existences formerly relegated to the realm of silence. From this profound, visceral affect, a new ecological ethic is proposed, and a more harmonious mode of existence is envisioned: “And that’s when it happens—/ you see everything/ through their eyes,/ their joy, their necessity;/ you wear their webbed fingers;/ your throat swells” (Oliver, 2017, p. 120). ‘Queering the Non-human’ in Oliver’s poetry thus effectively

narrows the distance between the “subject” and the “world” through our “receptivity” and our expansion into the world (O’ Rourke, 2008, p. xvii).

Just as Haraway urges humanity toward “making kin in the Chthulucene in order to cut the bonds of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene” (Haraway, 2016, pp. 4-5), Oliver’s method of queering into the vegetal and the non-human contributes to being “facilitative of a creation of the world, a redesigning of it, and makes space for new relations, affective ones, between the subject and world, and among the world’s objects” (O’ Rourke, 2008, pp. xvii-xviii). Oliver’s approach to “making kin as odd kin” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2) is further manifested in the poem “Aunt Leaf,” where she describes the titular figure as an “old woman made out of leaves” (Oliver, 2017, p. 422). Ecofeminist thought is clearly revealed within this conceptualization. In contrast to the members of the “godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2)—whom Oliver characterizes as those “who were kind, but solid as wood / and rarely wandered” (Oliver, 2017, p. 421)—“Aunt Leaf” exists as a material assemblage of feathers, leaves, and bark. This entity draws the poet into journeys across the natural world, leading her away from the lifeless city (a space that has even become hostile to survival) to experience alternative forms of existence and different modes of communion:

“Dear aunt, I’d call into the leaves,
and she’d rise up, like an old log in a pool,
and whisper in a language only the two of us
knew the word that meant follow,
and we’d travel
cheerful as birds
out of the dusty town and into the trees
where she would change us both into
something quicker— two foxes with black
feet,
two snakes green as ribbons,
two shimmering fish—
and all day we’d travel” (Oliver, 2017, p. 421).

However, the ‘queer’ orientation further possesses the capacity to expand the critical threshold of desire; one might argue that,

transcending even consanguineous ties, carnal desire remains the domain most subject to prohibition and the demand for regulation within any social system. As Giffney and Hird (2008) observe, anthropocentric thought is invariably tethered to a heterocentric gender framework: “the Human subject as analogous to heterosexuality” (p. 9). In other words, “the desire for the Human, the desire for recognition as Human” only serves to imprison us and sink us deeper “in the pit of heteronormativity” (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 9). Oliver, conversely, by queering nature and the vegetal, and by rejecting the anthropocentric framework, posits within her poetry not only new possibilities of existence and new forms of kinship but also novel “transmaterial affections” (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 186)—perhaps even establishing the forbidden “intercourse” between nature and culture. From the perspective of boundless communion, Oliver captures every contour, posture, and sensuous rhythm of the flora. This is evident in the “fast” breath of “the alders” in the poem “Three Poems for James Wright” (Oliver, 2017, p. 395), and the soft yet searingly brilliant dampness of the calyxes in “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches”: “I even heard a curl or two of music, damp and rouge red, / hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies” (Oliver, 2017, p. 247). Furthermore, the copulative rhythm of plants and all living things unfolds before the poet’s eyes in “Peonies”:

as in a dance to the great wedding,
the flowers bend their bright bodies, and tip
their fragrance to the air,
and rise,
their red stems holding
all that dampness and recklessness
gladly and lightly,
and there it is again—
beauty the brave, the exemplary,
blazing open (Oliver, 2017, pp. 297–298).

Elsewhere, in “The Pond,” she captures the lilies’ infinite longing for proximity and tenderness: “the lilies again are spread across the water. / I know now what they want is to touch each other” (Oliver, 2017, p. 41). The agency of desire, as we

can see, is strikingly pronounced throughout Oliver's descriptions of the vegetal world.

Through Oliver's lens, the botanical world persistently invites us to participate in physical encounters and communions; the question remains whether we can set aside the dictates of love—historically confined to heteronormative and anthropocentric frameworks—to enter into these novel engagements. Flora continuously issues such invitations within Oliver's poetry, for instance in the poem "When I Am Among the Trees": "Around me the trees stir in their leaves/ and call out, 'Stay awhile.'/ The light flows from their branches./ And they call again, 'It's simple,' they say,/ 'and you too have come/ into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled/ with light, and to shine" (Oliver, 2017, p. 123). Such botanical communions draw us back to our own physicality, fostering a deeper love and appreciation for our existence through a humble consciousness of both the vitality and the fragility inherent in the bodies we inhabit. As she asks in "Peonies": "Do you love this world?/ Do you cherish your humble and silky life?/ Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?" (Oliver, 2017, p. 298). Ultimately, this awareness of the material body—this boundless passion and love that transcends species distinctions—fills Oliver's collections with transcendent moments of visceral intimacy with nature, continuing in "Peonies":

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and
barefoot, into the garden,
and softly,
and exclaiming of their dearness,
fill your arms with the white and pink
flowers,
with their honeyed heaviness, their lush
trembling,
their eagerness
to be wild and perfect for a moment, before
they are
nothing, forever? (Oliver, 2017, p. 298)

In engaging with her poetry, the reader frequently encounters visceral 'points of contact' with the botanical realm, characterized by a profound sense of sensory ecstasy. As seen in the poem "Poppies," she writes: "Inside the bright

fields,/ touched by their rough and spongy gold, I am washed and washed/ in the river/ of earthly delight" (Oliver, 2017, p. 292). These tactile interactions and earthly joys—this eroticized physical communion with the vegetal world—compel Oliver to conceptualize both herself and the surrounding non-human environment as an intertwined existence of finite yet yearning bodies. For instance, in "Evidence," she declares: "As for the body, it is solid and strong and curious and full of detail; it wants to polish itself; it wants to love another body" (Oliver, 2017, p. 80). Consequently, the subjective voice of desire directed toward the flora becomes increasingly fervent throughout her verse, exemplified in "An old story": "My body says:/ let me up and out,/ I want to fondle those soft white flowers, open in the night" (Oliver, 2017, p. 50). These primal, corporeal longings for plant life are manifested with uninhibited jubilation. On numerous occasions, she alludes to physical unions with ancient oak trees, articulating a state of deprivation and intense yearning should these corporeal connections be obstructed or forbidden. In "Black oaks," she confesses: "I'm pale with longing/ for their thick bodies ruckled with lichen/ and you can't keep me from the woods, from the tonnage/ of their shoulders, and their shining green hair" (Oliver, 2017, p. 253).

By conceptualizing existence as a queer trajectory toward the non-human realm and the botanical world, Oliver's poetic voice dismantles established taboos surrounding love—be they heteronormative constraints or the singular validation of monogamous, '1:1' dynamics. Her oeuvre articulates a polyamorous sensibility toward the flora; this inter-material love encompasses not only a plurality of subjects but also a multiplicity of communicative practices enacted through a single physical form. This is manifested when bare footsteps encounter the earth, perceiving the intercourse between roots and the damp soil—a union promising procreation, as depicted in the poem "Sometimes" from the collection *Devotions*: "I walked slowly, and listened / to the crazy roots, in the drenched earth, laughing and growing" (Oliver, 2017, p. 106). It is also found in the act of embracing and caressing petals,

or in “loving with” the world through “the body’s sweet mouth,” as expressed in “On Thy Wondrous Work I Will Meditate” (Oliver, 2017, p. 137). Finally, as depicted in the poem “Honey Tree,” it occurs when bees pour a stream of light-sweet nectar into a hollow in the tree trunk, followed by the “I” who, driven by the rawest instinct, begins to “climb” and “clamber” into that “secret rip” of the tree, partaking in the quintessential nectar crystallized from the intimacy between bee and bark (Oliver, 1981, p. 81). Even the act of eating, through Oliver’s portrayal, emerges as a form of physical communion with the world.

Last but not least, if vegetal bodies—through the entirety of their presence—incessantly voice themselves, seeking connection and, in every possible way, blossoming into an intimacy with the surrounding material forms, then for Oliver, fragrance itself serves as the medium through which each flower interfaces with both the poet and the world. As the poet writes regarding the scent of roses in the poem “When the roses speak, I pay attention”: “Their fragrance all the while rising / from their blind bodies, making me / spin with joy” (Oliver, 2017, p. 124). Oliver characterizes the botanical forms of roses as “blind bodies.” Within this context, blindness does not denote a sensory deficiency; rather, it signifies a transgression against the rules, norms, and taboos governing such bodies—entities that choose to diffuse their fragrance into the atmosphere to invite an array of subjects into a state of communion. Among these is the ‘I,’ who finds themselves entranced within this intercorporeal union. Similarly, in the poem “Blue Iris,” the entire physical and spiritual being of the lyrical subject encounters a sudden, unanticipated surge of erotic stimulation—a climax—precipitated by the floral scent and the wind:

Give me a little time, I say back to its
staring, silver face.
It doesn’t happen all of a sudden, you know.
‘Doesn’t it?’ says the wind, and breaks open,
releasing
distillation of blue iris.
And my heart panics not to be, as I long to
be,
the empty, waiting, pure, speechless

receptacle (Oliver, 2017, p. 215).

Through the evocative phrasing of ‘releasing distillation,’ the text suggests a sexual act reaching its peak of pleasure, conjuring imagery of ejaculation and arousal fluid. The wind, intertwined with the floral scent, permeates every fiber of the speaker’s body; the ‘I,’ no longer able to resist this physical allure, can only surrender to the experience. It is precisely this sublimation within the realm of phyto-eroticism that harbors the potent capability to dissolve the dualistic boundaries separating humanity from the botanical world.

CONCLUSION

Writing on Mary Oliver, Grace Safford (n.d.) once observed, “She’s not a name that will ever be forgotten—by people or plants.” A novel ecological ethic, specifically one concerning botanical life, is articulated within her poetry. By foregrounding shared corporeal materiality, Oliver establishes an intimate kinship between humans and the non-human world. Ultimately, she positions interspecies communion as a radical practice that dissolves anthropocentric boundaries and liberates human lived experience.

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