

Research Article

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Relational Transilience in the Garden: Plant–Human Encounters in More-than-Human Life Narratives

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Abstract: Whereas many indigenous and non-western cultures see plants and humans as connected, western worldviews tend to disregard plants as material commodities. Plant non-thinking of this kind is increasingly being challenged in response to the environmental threats arising from human exceptionalism. This essay investigates garden narratives as a form of more-than-human life writing which depicts plant–human relations as mutually transformative and reciprocal. I argue that garden narratives pioneer such a rethinking as a win-win scenario. The positive developments garden writers document are consistent with a concept put forward in environmental psychology: transilience. Making reference to five recent western garden narratives I show how plant encounters can help us move towards an emerging environmental culture which emphasises more-than-human embeddedness and embraces symbiotic over competitive relations.

Keywords: garden writing, more than human, plant/human relationality, transilience, environmental humanities, relationalities, new knowledge culture, life writing

1 Introduction

“The general public largely does not notice plants in their environment and therefore does not appreciate how important they are to the biosphere and society” (Parsley, 2020, p. 598). “Most people who bother to think about plants at all tend to regard them as the mute, immobile furniture of our world – useful enough, and generally attractive, but obviously second-class citizens in the republic of life on Earth” (Pollan, 2015, p. xi). “Where plants are studied in Western epistemes, they have been largely viewed as passive: such epistemes have difficulty in coming to terms with the active nature and agentivity of plants” (Gibson & Ellis, 2018, p. 76). Observations such as these characterise plant (non)thinking in much of the western world. Competitive beliefs in human superiority over other creatures and a lack of ability, or willingness, to imagine other ways of engaging with plant lives perpetuate exploitative practices that exacerbate present-day problems, most notably, climate change. Many of these occur on a scale which makes them hard to fathom, and to address. This essay suggests that gardens are a good place to start thinking and caring beyond the scope of human lifeworlds. I analyse recent western garden narratives to show how individuals learn to see plants differently and develop a greater openness towards more-than-human relationalities and a more symbiotic worldview.

The corpus chosen for this enquiry is made up of narratives that depict plant rethinking as prompted by relatable challenges rooted in everyday western culture in present-day Britain and North America: Mark Cullen’s *Escape to Reality* (2018) illustrates how communing with trees helped the author overcome a serious illness. Debi Goodwin’s *Victory Garden for Trying Times* (2019) depicts plant encounters in the context of

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mourning. Rosie Kinchen's *The Ballast Seed* (2023) and Alice Vincent's *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life* (2019) discuss the power of gardening and horticultural therapy to address, respectively, postnatal depression and heartbreak. Finally, the YouTube channel *Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't* (2019ff) trespasses into neglected spaces to raise awareness of plants as educators about belonging, adaptation and symbiotic relations.

In western public spheres, relational imaginaries of symbiosis and collaboration have so far “made very little impact on the popular imagination, which continues to be dominated by idealisations (and illusions) of freedom, independence, and autonomy” (Drichel, 2019, pp. 1–2). Present times of VUCA see people in WEIRD countries struggling to find common ground even with members of our own species. Insights into more-than-human kinship and plant agency that are part of a live cultural heritage in many indigenous cultures¹ have atrophied from western discourses. While some take inspiration from indigenous knowledge practices, appropriation is not a healthy route towards a live more-than-human relationality, especially in view of the continuing disenfranchisement of non-western cultures.² Western cultures need to grow their own way to adapt and go forward.

I situate the garden narratives examined below in an on-going paradigm shift in western knowledge culture.³ Encounter, kinship, relationality, sympoiesis, vibrancy – in the current precarious stage of the Anthropocene many disciplines are developing new vocabularies of plural identities, embeddedness, and co-creative networking “to try to replace the monological, hierarchical and mechanistic models that have characterised our dysfunctional partnership with nature by more mutual, communicative and responsive ones that could put that partnership on a better basis” (Plumwood, 2002, pp. 11–12).⁴ The garden writers discussed below are brought into contact with plants by an array of “human-sized” crises, but in the process, they (often unexpectedly) experience plants as impactful Others with attitudes to change unlike their own. Their narratives document a shift towards seeing humans as “embedduals”, rather than lone individuals – creatures whose sense of “wholeness” depends on their “embeddedness culture” (Kegan, 1982, p. 102), and only some of this culture is human.

This enquiry draws on a concept adapted from environmental psychology which I put in dialogue with plant–human relations to characterise the more-than-human learning process documented in garden writings. Valentina Lozano Nasi has coined the term “transilience” to evaluate people’s perceived capacity to respond positively to climate change. Transilience encompasses three affordances: persistence, adaptability and transformability. The first of these, persistence, concerns people’s “perceived capacity ... to cope and carry on in the face of climate change risks.” Secondly, transilience “reflects the perceived capacity to adapt flexibly to climate change risks, which involves the perception of a range of options. Thirdly, transilience includes the perception that people transform or evolve in a way which they regard as positive, “for instance by learning something new” (Lozano Nasi et al., 2023, 2024). Between them, these three affordances map stages of learning to come to terms with the dynamic of change in our surroundings and corresponding on-going transformations of our sense of self, embracing the openness of transformation and encompassing connotations of an as yet undefined beyond, not in a metaphysical but in a material sense. Where this concept goes beyond simply combining adaptability and resilience is in the way it highlights the fact that we are in transition, empowering us to embrace change as something we do, rather than have happen to us. The attitude underlying the concept is enabling, highlighting agency: the necessary learning processes are framed as personal growth. Lozano Nasi stresses that most studies “on adaptation to contemporary adversities, like climate change, do not seem to recognise the possibility of new opportunities and positive change resulting from dealing with such adversities” (Lozano Nasi, 2023, p. 11). Transilience is committed to finding opportunities in adversity, thereby offering an alternative to the negative framing prevalent in present-day crisis discourse (Neimanis et al.,

¹ Indigenous kinship with plants is explained in Geniusz (2015), Kimmerer (2013).

² The ironies and extractivism of this have been unpacked in Tynan (2021).

³ Recent examples of texts that make changes in the plant sciences and other transdisciplinary fields accessible include Bridle (2022), Schlanger (2024).

⁴ A good overview of this emerging lexicon and its potential to articulate new symbiotic perspectives is provided in Karpouzou and Zampaki (2023).

2015), highlighting that adaptation and learning are on-going processes – moving targets, habits rather than habitats.

Reading transilience as key “to address[ing] the urgencies and anxieties of the present” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 53), in my application of the term I am looking at ways in which recent garden narratives articulate more-than-human relational dimensions in the acts of learning they depict.

As many people discovered while trapped by the COVID pandemic, gardening and plant encounters have numerous health benefits.⁵ Researching the therapeutic value of gardening in sanatoriums, prisons and similar institutions, psychologist Sue Stuart-Smith not only attests that plants improve physical and mental recovery, she also stresses that the co-creative agency of plants boosts creativity: “gardening is more accessible than other creative endeavours, such as painting and music because you are halfway there before you start; the seed has all its potential within – the gardener simply helps unlock it” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 46).⁶ The realisation that plants are alive and act upon humans has a transformative effect on how individuals perceive themselves and their surroundings, and they may help people overcome hopelessness, disconnection and trauma. Pollan suggests that garden encounters benefit plants, too,⁷ but in the absence of garden narratives authored by plants, such interpretations lie beyond the scope of this essay. Ultimately, as fellow citizens of a heating planet, plants can be surmised to welcome humans in industrial states learning more about symbiotic relations and the “environmental culture” Val Plumwood envisages, “that values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it” (Plumwood, 2002, p. 3).

I argue that garden writings pioneer a win/win of this kind as they reveal plants as agents that prompt humans to think, feel and behave differently. Gardens, the places which give “most of us our most direct and intimate experience of nature” (Pollan, 1996, p. 3) have been depicted in media ranging from poetry and coffee-table books to make-over shows and philosophical treatises as well as How-To guides. The garden narratives we will turn to in a moment broadly fall under the heading of life writing: non-fictional self-reflexive accounts of garden encounters. While not much research has yet been done on the cognitive affordances of life writing to enhance theory of mind,⁸ in an age of self-documentation, life writing practices make for particularly relatable narratives which map on-going changes in notions of identity and relationships (Baxter, 2023).

That being said, garden narratives are anthropocentric, revolving around the “assumption that the “bio” is a human subject” and “a seemingly natural order of things separates persons, objects, and things: persons are individuated and singular; objects are commodities.” (Whitlock, 2019, p. 34). The focus of this analysis is thus necessarily limited to human perspectives in that the narratives examined here are about human lives and how plants unexpectedly benefit human beings in a crisis. Self-interest is a gateway towards recognising the many entanglements we have with more-than-human lives. Western cultural praxis needs these baby steps in order to gradually pave the way for an active search for new mutualities and reciprocities.

Plants don’t need terms such as transilience; they demonstrate qualities consistent with the concept as they go about their daily lives. But such terms may help us disseminate the idea that it might be worth learning to think with and about plants. As Zoe Schlanger indicates, there is an uplift involved in trying to understand plants better.

Regardless of what we think of plants, they continue to surge upward, toward the sun. In this ruined global moment, plants offer a window into a verdant way of thinking. For us to truly be part of this world, to be awake to its roiling aliveness, we need to understand plants. (Schlanger, 2024, p. 5).

⁵ Corley et al. (2021), Harris et al. (2014), Ong et al. (2019), Theodorou et al. (2021).

⁶ In a similar vein, Fran Sorin proposes a programme to unlock lost creative powers through plants and gardening, Sorin (2016). In his foreword, Larry Dossey MD asserts that “gardening is one of the most potent ways of opening the unconscious, allowing thoughts we usually keep suppressed to surface in our awareness.”

⁷ Examples cited include potatoes and apples manipulating humans to cultivate them, Pollan (2001). Bridle’s investigation of different kinds of intelligence investigates plants alongside slime mould and other non-human ‘ways of being’, Bridle (2022).

⁸ With the exception of an article which somewhat grudgingly extends the cognitive benefits of fiction to life narratives: Keen (2016).

And if understanding them is beyond us at present, at we might at least develop an interest in their problem-solving strategies.⁹ The discovery of unexpected more-than-human reciprocities in the plant–human contact zone induces individuals to open up to non-linear, non-verbal and indirect answers to their questions.

The garden is a space associated with positive emotions, where hope and optimism actually triumph over adversity and where material steps can be taken toward making utopias real.¹⁰ I read gardens as sites where “the event of learning” (Reinertsen, 2016, p. 2) involved in plant thinking can be experienced. It might be utopian to expect such experiences as the hopeful dynamic of discovery in garden writings to catch on universally, but in the longer run, garden narratives in combination with climate fiction and initiatives such as the Solarpunk movement or to some extent, branches of the Symbiocene, might help create a path towards understanding humans as assemblages in myriads of visible and invisible layers of symbiosis which narratives of heroic individualism have led us to dismiss, ignore and forget.

The writers we are about to turn to experience that they are not alone in the garden, that plants involve them in perspectives on growth and development beyond their ken or planning. They discover that plants are good to think with, not only in the context of environmental challenges. In what follows I discuss five cases in which individuals relate to plants, learning to appreciate the behaviours and even ingenuity of individual plants.

2 Plant Encounters in Garden Narratives: Five Examples

2.1 Mark Cullen, *Escape to Reality* (2018)

Escape to Reality (2018) is a collection of vignettes in which Mark Cullen looks back on 40 years’ worth of experience as a plantsman in Canada and reflects on how human-plant relations have changed in his lifetime.¹¹ The book, co-written with his son, illustrates the workings of symbiotic transience in all but the name: it opens on the health benefits of plant encounters and maps the rise of a more-than-human mentality as Canadian gardeners develop an “interest in attracting pollinators, creating biodiversity, and pursuing the social benefits of the gardening experience through community gardens, social media and even farmers’ markets” (Cullen & Cullen, 2019, p. viii). Cullen frames the garden as a space from which to grow a prosperous future. He traces more-than-human interconnectivities from the various critters at work in the soil through relations between human gardeners, farmers and urban planners before “Sowing a Vision” (Cullen & Cullen, 2019, p. 113) in times of climate change. The book gently raises ecological awareness as Cullen covers trends relatable to garden lovers across the country and beyond and imparts practical tips. It is not until halfway through the book, in an epistolary chapter titled “Dear Garden, I have changed,” that Cullen reveals himself to be “a cancer survivor” (Cullen & Cullen, 2019, p. 77). Here, plants, trees in particular, come to the fore as agents he seeks out to process his diagnosis:

The day the doctor gave me the bad news I drove slowly, in search of some green space. I found a small park...with one large tree growing on the margin of the parking lot. I sat on the cool green grass, looked at the tree, and began asking questions.

⁹ Prominent examples have found mainstream favour, especially the notion of a ‘Wood Wide Web’ based on Suzanne Simard’s research into forests Immerwahr (2024), Simard (2021, 2022), and authors such as Richard Mabey, Peter Wohlleben, and Zoe Schlanger communicate changes in plant science to a general public. In his cultural history of our plant relations, *The Cabaret of Plants* (2015), Richard Mabey discusses several examples of plants that help combat the challenges posed by climate change. Citing the ability of samphire to consolidate land against erosion, he envisages a collaborative attitude to plants: “Inviting, so to speak, vegetation to suggest its own solution to environmental challenges is different from treating it as a submissive service provider, and, I’d suggest, a better basis for a long-term relationship” Mabey (2015).

¹⁰ As indicated by Michel Foucault’s inclusion of gardens as prototypical heterotopias, Foucault (1986).

¹¹ The author’s webpage gives access to some of his other horticultural publications and broadcasts: <https://markcullen.com/books-2/>.

When I arrived home, I sat on the front porch and watched the feathered wildlife while I continued to ask questions, this time directing them to no one in particular. But the big oak tree in our front yard seemed to be listening. (Cullen & Cullen, 2019, pp. 78–79).

The passage is quite literally anthropo-central, yet it illustrates that human centrality does not equal coming first. Its tentative and exploratory tone stands out from the rest of the text. Until this point, Cullen conveyed his message with a degree of authority, enlivened by anecdotes, backed by quotations and statistics. Here, by contrast, a frontier of human knowledge is reached and plants take over. The epistolary chapter heading is telling: while the human is doing all the talking, trees are depicted as active listeners. Any answers given are non-verbal and do not easily translate into the conversational temporalities of “human doings”.

As documented by the existence of the book, Cullen develops transilience: he adapts to his new circumstances and changes his pace to combine healing with learning. Prompted by the example of trees, he embraces a fallow period of non-moving, sketching a recovery period spent observing, listening and dreaming as he processes the plants’ subtle lessons on change. Cullen’s plant encounter engenders a greater appreciation of the present, with a commitment to more mindful behaviour, to actively listen, observe, create, nurture and detach from goal-directed actions: “I will get off the ride-on mower and spend more time wandering through my apple orchard without any specific purpose, other than just doing it” (Cullen & Cullen, 2019, p. 79). His list is consistent with the process of “gardening the mind” as envisaged by Stuart-Smith in which the “protected physical space” of the garden allows “[i]deas that have been lying dormant [to] come to the surface and thoughts that are barely formed sometimes come together and unexpectedly take shape” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 13). “Escape to Reality” as outlined by his book thus involves a dialogue between hard facts and histories on the one hand and new ways of making space for emergent ideas and practices.

2.2 Debi Goodwin, *A Victory Garden for Trying Times* (2019)

Debi Goodwin’s *Victory Garden for Trying Times* (2019) begins as a record of her mission to grow healthy food in order to help her partner, fellow author and producer Peter Kavanagh, fight cancer. Throughout the bulk of the narrative plants are recruits in this project: between describing doctors’ appointments and other day-to-day experiences, Goodwin plants vegetables and explains which health benefits justify a particular plant’s inclusion in her victory project. But then Peter passes quickly due to unforeseen complications, before the garden gets its chance. With no more victory in sight, the narrative shifts to recounting how the garden helps the author grieve. She recounts a more-than-human epiphany in the garden which breaks the paralysis of shock when she comes across what turns out to be a “mourning cloak butterfly” on a maple her late husband specifically asked her to plant (Goodwin, 2019, p. 167). Esoteric in tone yet practical in effect, this encounter redirects Goodwin to self-care, with plant care acting as a mediator that helps her realise she needs to do something to adapt to her changed circumstances: “The next day, I decided I had to get back to the garden” (Goodwin, 2019, p. 167). Goodwin’s experience illustrates a process described by Stuart-Smith to illustrate how interacting with plants fosters a belief in continuity: “Melanie Klein alludes to this in one of her papers on the subject of mourning where she writes “The poet tells us that Nature mourns with the mourner.” She goes on to show how, in order to emerge from a state of grief, we need to recover a sense of goodness in the world and in ourselves” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 19). As Goodwin alternates between the bureaucracy of death and getting the garden back into shape, she learns to process the linearity of human death with the help of the plants’ cyclical rhythms of regeneration: victory is not a moment but a rhythm. In this relational braiding of human and plant lives, it is a food crop which marks a subtle shift towards embracing futurity:

As I carried out the garlic I’d grown in my Victory Garden, I told myself I was just doing a job on a list. I reminded myself that grief, like writing or keeping a garden, is step by step, clove by clove. Besides, if I were alive the next year, I’d still have to eat. But as I knelt on the ground, some of the old magic came back. Not a thrill, exactly, like I was birthing new plants or anything that profound. But a spark of faith that the cloves I was dropping into the soil would survive buried in the darkness; that once again they would slowly transform into fat roots and healthy shoots (Goodwin, 2019, p. 189).

The memoir shows multiple exchanges in which human and non-human voices and lives, singularities and polyphonies overlap, detach and reconnect in a shared dynamic where the voice that ultimately aids the narrator's recovery is non-verbal. In the process of comparing her fate to the vegetables she is planting Goodwin depicts herself in a live diorama in which seed, root, garden and gardener blend together: "as I stood in the peace of our yard, listening for the songs of birds and a single voice that had disappeared, I knew that somewhere inside me I had ... a will to push myself into the light again" (Goodwin, 2019, p. 189). Like Cullen's trees, Goodwin's garlic helps her adjust to change, eventually recognising motion as progress: "The garden had no clear answers for me that fall day; all it could do was allow me the quiet and the space to jump from despair to hope to despair" (Goodwin, 2019, p. 190). In this interweaving of thought, emotion and embodied actions, Goodwin ascribes the improvement of her mental condition to a chemical response enabled by gardening: "I couldn't put my finger on what I was feeling until later, when I read some research that claimed that mere contact with *Mycobacterium vaccae*, found in soil, releases serotonin in the brain" (Goodwin, 2019, p. 190). The experience of what Donna Haraway terms "becoming with" other species (Haraway, 2016), in this case, mostly with plants, and the reciprocity Goodwin experiences in the garden eventually produce the relational act of claiming victory by writing about the garden and thereby reaching out to a future beyond her own.

2.3 Rosie Kinchen, *The Ballast Seed* (2023)

According to Henry Mitchell, "no gardener needs reminding that life depends on plants." (Mitchell, 1999, p. 3). But not everyone is a gardener, as exemplified by journalist Rosie Kinchen: "Gardening had never interested me in the slightest. Quite the opposite, in fact" (Kinchen, 2022, p. 50). So for her to discover a correlation between her own well-being and plants, and to write a book about this, makes for quite a transformation. Kinchen's story also lends support to my argument that reading about plants and mediated plant-human relations can enhance empathy for more-than-human lives: the author's study of plants is in part motivated by a visit to the Marianne North gallery in Kew and subsequent perusal of North's plant-hunting memoir.

Whereas Goodwin finds her life derailed by death, *The Ballast Seed* (2023) depicts a crisis caused by a birth, an unplanned and difficult one, of a newborn who turns out to suffer from food intolerances. The book outlines how Kinchen overcomes her postnatal depression with the help of plants and horticultural therapy. Connections between motherhood and the growing of plants have recently gained critical and popular attention,¹² but in practice, Kinchen's pregnancy jeopardises her professional identity and social status, confirming her belief that motherhood is not "the right job" for her (Kinchen, 2022, p. 12). If the early stages of her narrative see her roaming London's green periphery with her pram, consigned to the margins by biology and resenting it, her isolation sends her on a journey of discovery of the plant world. The surprise recovery of a drowned aloe makes her feel like a legitimate caregiver when nothing else does: "The plant was indeed alive – happy, even. I had saved it from its dismal fate" (Kinchen, 2022, p. 49). The "lift" this results in mainly comes from the notion "that some sort of communication had taken place. I had always liked plants but I thought of them as decoration... Now I realized that they were sentient; they could tell me things, they could react and respond" (Kinchen, 2022, p. 49). Plants help Kinchen resolve her body and mind dichotomy, notably during a visit to Kew Gardens as the atmosphere in a greenhouse, reminiscent of her time in the Caribbean, has a restorative effect both on herself and her baby. Prompted by a site "built to show man's triumph over nature" where "nature had won" (Kinchen, 2022, p. 35) she begins to unpack her maternal family's entanglements with the colonial spice trade and confronts her dislocation as "the white baby" (Kinchen, 2022, p. 13) in an ethnically mixed family of migrant and peripatetic backgrounds.

The narrative shows Kinchen grow transilient through plant discoveries and the various layers of more-than-human embeddedness they lead her to explore, from befriending a deceased imperialist to noticing

¹² Jones (2023), Vincent (2023).

landmark plants and eventually joining a horticultural therapy group and signing up for a course on botany. Plant care helps Kinchen come to terms with her doubts about maternal and other forms of care in the human sphere. The eponymous ballast seed she aligns with epitomises such detachment from self-determination: “trade vessels carried ballast... In among this ballast were seeds, tiny stowaways hitching a ride from port to port. These seeds remained dormant until the ballast was dumped on heaps outside harbours, often clandestinely to avoid taxes. ... ballast heaps were thriving habitats. Some [seeds] are still lying there, waiting for the right conditions in which to grow” (Kinchen, 2022, p. 1). In the spirit of making room for such wider temporalities she begins to regrow the creativity that eventually leads her to commit her plant relations to print, integrating her plant learning and her writing persona.

2.4 Alice Vincent, *Rootbound. Rewilding a Life* (2019)

Compared to Kinchen’s troubles, a painful breakup in one’s 20s as detailed in *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life* (2019) might seem a minor inconvenience. But in times of precarity and gentrification, it can cause a complicated uprooting. For a millennial adept at collaboratively processing personal experience via social media (such as the author’s now-defunct blog, *Noughticulture*), this is a subject for a minute redrawing of the boundaries between private and public spheres.¹³ Since Alice Vincent is a passionate urban gardener, the resulting narrative blends dissolving her household with passages supplanting groundedness via plant and garden history. In a study on plants, place and movement, Edward Casey and Michael Marder assert that plant encounters can supply connectivity to the way we think: “The sensuous experience of the vegetal world reawakens in us another kind of thinking resistant to abstract and decontextualized thought” (Casey & Marder, 2024, p. xiii). If we grant that Vincent’s nomadic commute between couch surfing and her green balcony counts as something like the peripatetic exploration Casey and Marder discuss, *Rootbound* illustrates semi-embodied becoming-with plants as the narrator adopts plant-like sensibilities: plants “feel-think on the periphery of their sentient bodies, akin to plants that cognise the world on the outer edges of their extension (at the root tips, unfurling leaves, meristems promising future growth, etc.)” (Casey & Marder, 2024, p. xiii). Over the year it takes Vincent to settle into a new relationship, potted plants supply the eponymous rootedness as she identifies with their negotiations of limitations:

A rootbound plant will push at its boundaries, come to take on the shape of the container it inhabits, even pushing out at the holes in the bottom where water is supposed to flow. They need more – more nutrients from more soil; more space to expand – in order to reach their full potential. (Vincent, 2020, p. 94).

This is one of many instances where the narrator’s identification with plants reroutes a struggle to come to terms with a period of growth that feels like a regression. Plants open a vista of a different life and growth that induces her to rethink her relation to surface markers of success and progress. Similarly to the learning or healing processes depicted here, transilience eventually involves shifting focus to frame plant–human relations in more interdependent terms, as Vincent questions her own role in plant–human reciprocity: “if we only expect nature, or our gardens, to heal us – to make us feel better, to provide a balm or solace from our daily problems – how reciprocal can our relationship with the earth really be?” (Vincent, 2020, p. 54). The positive transformation that characterises transilience encompasses shared adaptation:

The more I garden and the more time I spend paying close attention to the weather and the life cycles of the plants I grow, the more aware I am of the climate crisis. I feel drought, heatwaves and strange, warm winters all the more fiercely because I see their effects in the garden. In looking blindly to gardens as spaces only to heal ourselves, we ignore the suffering we’ve inflicted on the earth in taking from it so relentlessly for centuries – and the opportunity we have to tread more gently. (Vincent, 2020, pp. 55–56).

¹³ <https://www.alicevincent.co.uk/>. Her most recent garden narrative, *Why Women Grow* (2023), engages in a wider enquiry into women’s plant–human relations.

As exemplified by this environmental widening of the lens, *Rootbound* records multiple learning processes, and it continues live acts of communication with the author's online followers via platforms such as Instagram. While Vincent's personal drama eventually resolves itself, her research into plant lives and the history of plant–human relations produces an awareness of a situation where no happy ending is in sight. We are nowhere near closure where environmental challenges and plant–human relations are concerned. But multimedia communities are becoming actively involved in raising awareness of plant perspectives. Not least due to the COVID pandemic, plant–human encounters have spread into cyberspace, especially in social media: platforms such as Instagram or Substack, relying on visual storytelling, photographs and videos, have proved fruitful sites for the proliferation of plant narratives and the formation of communities devoted to exploring human and plant entanglements. In view of this, the last garden narrative discussed here branches out into online media.

2.5 Joey Santore, *Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't* (2010ff)

The guerrilla gardening channel titled *Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't*, run by Joey Santore (aka Tony Santoro) takes more-than-human knowledge practices beyond the garden gate, or even house plant ownership, not just metaphorically.¹⁴ Santore affirms Stuart-Smith's assertion that "gardening is... an intrinsically hopeful act and it is a reparative act but, particularly in the world today, it can also be a defiant act" (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 61).¹⁵ Delinquency is part of the persona this botanist assumes, along with an exaggerated accent, a narrative that jumps between socio-political rant and botanical lecture, and a style which derives its infotainment value from the unwonted contrast between expletives and scientific terminology. Many videos take the shape of rambles about the countryside, often in neglected fenced off areas, where Santore greets plants like old acquaintances, zooming his camera in to explain the plant's adaptive advantages and morphology. Taxonomic details and botanical terminology are supplied in captions, belying the random nature of the enterprise. With self-deprecating titles designed to deride privilege in favour of a scatological style of protest, Santore's channel embraces the aesthetic of a criminally flavoured subculture that despises present-day neoliberalism and capitalism at large, giving street cred not only to plants, but also to caring for and about them.¹⁶ Sharing a widespread passion for (true) crime the channel mobilises interest in restoring justice to the more-than-human downtrodden. Plants highlighted are usually native, often small and unassuming or disregarded as weeds. Imported and cultivated showier specimens such as those planted by city councils are pointed out only to gloat over how badly they fare, and invasive species are denounced as marauding enemies. Santore does not have much time for established institutions, so concluding an academic discussion with a glimpse of his work plants hope for killing the lawn within academia to make room for a future knowledge culture of active and creative plant thinking and doing.¹⁷ Highly articulate and knowledgeable, Santore downplays official qualifications and makes reference to his own ADHD, delinquent past and other items no one in their right mind would list in their CV. Describing himself as a college drop-out he aligns himself with the "weeds" he highlights while demonstrating a degree of expertise and communicative skills many tenured colleagues might envy, cogently explaining the complexities of the ailing ecosystem while seemingly ranting about bad city planning.

The law-breaking theme the channel invokes is grafted onto the message that what should actually be deemed illegal are the extractivist practices of the western world with its destruction of biospheres. These are epitomised by the chief target of Santore's criticism, summarised by the slogan "kill your lawn." His

¹⁴ Santore (2009). The channel bills itself as "a low-brow, crass approach to plant ecology as muttered by a misanthropic Chicago Italian." It currently has 381.000 subscribers (nearly 24 million views) and more than 700 videos that eloquently and humorously document individual plants or landscapes in different climate zones.

¹⁵ She is not alone in making this claim: other prominent investigations of plant defiance include Helphand (2006), McKay (2011).

¹⁶ Examples include Santore (2017, 2019a,b). In other videos Santore recommends guide books for self-study and answers botanical questions collected from social media Wired.com (2022).

¹⁷ Santore (2009). Santore has also published a series of podcasts: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11779334/>.

“Somewhat Verbally Abusive ‘Kill Your Lawn’ Instructional Video Nice” (Santore, 2022) derides lawn maintenance as misguided and harmful, and he asks viewers to obtain a sag cutter from “home despot”, with bonus points for stealing rather than purchasing the tool. As the information box indicates, this comic stance has a more serious goal, which is to “kill the lawn within yourself”, making room for systemic change. Santore’s school of practical defiance makes ecological challenges accessible and entertaining to individuals around the world, breaking the apathy and crisis fatigue which is currently affecting most larger social and political systems. Santore’s channel pioneers a knowledge culture that takes Anthropocene concerns and plant science beyond the academic sphere.

Like the print narratives of plant encounters examined above, Santore’s channel demonstrates a quality of transilience which not only indicates an ability to cope with trying circumstances but to creatively transcend them with the help of plants, cultivating new media and rewilding science communication. His channel breaks boundaries, not only when he cuts through wire fences to trespass onto neglected properties, but also conceptually as it blends humour with education and practical hands-on activism. Liberating plants is symptomatic of liberating information and enabling people to rediscover local flora. Santore’s case highlights that if we are to collectively develop transilience and break the impasse of climate change fatigue we might need to adopt some of the non-hierarchical behaviours demonstrated by plants.

Through their more-than-human narratives, the writers discussed in this essay take their transilient developments beyond the private sphere of their individual tribulations, raising awareness of the fact that plants not only support people in and through crises of different kinds but may prompt and certainly deserve more response-ability, respect and reciprocity from human beings. Directing attention to emergent notions and letting other-than-human temporalities unfold rather than imposing human frames, such writings contribute to the advent of a more exploratory attitude towards environmental challenges which approaches ongoing change with a willingness to make space for the more-than-human and search for more relational benefits.

3 Conclusions

In times of VUCA, it is comforting to think that we might have unexpected more-than-human allies and role models to help us develop more relational perspectives on how to address the many contemporary crises and challenges. This essay has taken a stroll through a familiar space of plant encounters, a site where “two creative energies meet – human creativity and nature’s creativity.” The garden “is a place of overlap between what is “me” and “not-me”, between what we can conceive of and what the environment gives us to work with” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 20). More-than-human garden life writings such as those analysed above show how humanity is entangled with plants, and they foster a conception of life as a rhizome of experiences which have visible parts and emerging invisible threshold ones. This essay has argued that garden narratives map an on-going transformation in western knowledge practices that plant thinking is a part of, a move toward more relational and symbiotic imaginaries and perspectives. Through a brief analysis of five recent more-than-human life narratives I have examined a range of possibilities that arise when individuals realise that “plants are marvellous teachers of reciprocity” (Boyd, 2023, p. 288). The developments recorded in the garden writings examined here prompt a rethinking of how we define knowledge and growth. Plant encounters help resituate the body and emotions as important dimensions of how human beings generate meaning. Foregrounding symbiotic rather than competitive forms of being that emphasise groundedness and embeddedness, the plant–human relations depicted in my small corpus of garden narratives induce individuals to shift from an impact- or product-centred mentality to one which is more processual as plant care “involves a kind of getting to know that is somehow always in process” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 10), not least because the subject of care is multifarious and layered. The garden fosters this kind of perspective as gardeners “build a relationship with the place in its entirety – its climate, its soil, and the plants growing within it” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 10). Plants model transilience and the authors perceive these developments in terms of learning and growth. In the

process, their perspective on the entanglements of their personal problems in the larger picture of environmental change is transformed.

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