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Vegetal Being: Dreamwork, Ritual, and Performance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Abstract

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Vegetal Being:

Dreamwork, Ritual, and Performance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Briana Hanratty

June 2023

Advisor: Selah Saterstrom

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Abstract

In this thesis, I am writing towards an ecofeminist informed reading of the English version of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith. My aim is to display how, like an ecosystem of complex interdependency, it is impossible to separate body from theory from text from ecological context. To engage with this form of ecofeminism, I center an autotheoretical methodology with voices from ritual theory and performance theory in order to examine how Yeong-hye, the titular vegetarian of Han Kang's novel, operates as a narrative-level metaphor for the desire for erotic ecology as a mode of ecological and somatic healing.

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An Introduction

I am writing towards an ecofeminist informed reading of the English translation of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith in 2015. I have engaged with this writing's environment in fits and spurts, in Denver at graduate school and during visits home to my family in New York. Through this process, my intention is to parse what it means to read a novel that challenges me to consider my body in its accumulations of contexts. My methodology is then a reflective surface for these accumulations, an intersection of ecofeminism, ritual theory, performance theory, and an autotheory that centers the interconnectedness of body, theory, text, and environment.

Theoretical Ecology

Scholarship on autotheory emphasizes the term's mutable definition and purview. According to Arianne Zwartjes, "autotheory could be seen as methodology, a way of using bodily experience to gather knowledge."¹ Lauren Fournier extends this definition by examining autotheory's relationship to the historical development of feminist theory and the ways in which autotheoretical writing can "exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh

¹ Arianne Zwartjes, "Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory," *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019).

effects.”² I argue that it is crucial to know a body’s ecology and the impact such an ecology has on the experience of reading with and through the body, a sentiment supported in the works of writers and theorists such as Lorde,³ Gumbs,⁴ and Lauren Fournier.⁵

As an interdisciplinary field, ecofeminism incorporates contributions from ecology, ecocriticism, and traditional, Western-based feminisms.⁶ Many writers in ecofeminism, such as Mary Mellor,⁷ Greta Gaard,⁸ and Richard Twine⁹ base their contributions to the field on white or privileged perspectives. They focus on addressing the materialist debate within ecofeminism around transcendence and immanence, with the body caught somewhere between these two states.¹⁰ While I acknowledge this legacy

² Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 2.

³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 2007).

⁴ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico: AK Press, 2020).

⁵ Lauren Fournier, “Introduction” in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021).

⁶ Margarita Estévez-Saá and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Eco-Caring: Contemporary Debates on Ecofeminism(s) [Special Section],” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 47, no. 1–4 (January 2018): 123–258, doi:10.1080/00497878.2018.1425509.

⁷ Mary Mellor, “Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective,” *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 1 (2000): 107–123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27766058>; Mary Mellor, “Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective,” *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 1 (2000): 107–23, muse.jhu.edu/article/370416.

⁸ Greta Gaard, Simon Estok, and Serpil Oppermann, eds., *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism: Making a Difference* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013); Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

⁹ Richard Twine, “Ma(r)king Essence – Ecofeminism and Embodiment,” *Ethics and the Environment* 6, no. 2 (2001): 31–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/een.2001.0017>.

¹⁰ Gaard argues that a materialist approach to the intersection between feminism and environmentalism is crucial to contemporary ecofeminism – with “materialism” here referring to the material conditions of a

of ecofeminist thinking, this writing centers the need for moving beyond these privileged binaries and into a broader eco-attuned theoretical approach. I have been inspired by the work of Black, queer, and underrepresented voices that have long worked in the tradition of reconceptualizing the power structures, systems of domination, and communal relations that are essential for fully utilizing the interpretive possibilities within ecofeminist theory, both in a text and in a body.

In approaching ecofeminism and ecocriticism from the margins, I give precedence to the question of aliveness, animate beings, and theories that question how humans relate to one another in the context of nature. Andreas Weber explores the animate and speaks of an aliveness in the natural world that transforms it from a collection of biologically discrete objects under study to subjects of aliveness.¹¹ This subjectivity coordinates with Kevin Quashie's discussion of the aliveness of a text in that it draws attention to ways of approaching established ideologies of the subject/object binary, value, and relationality through this meditating concept of aliveness.¹² Weber's book *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology* extends his theory of aliveness to the sense of community and connection inherent in ecological thinking. He reframes relation into an "erotic ecology" by stating, "There is only one immutable truth: No being is purely individual; nothing comprises

woman as an ecology, or an environmental system that include body, nature, and society. Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism," in *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (2011): 26-53. doi:10.1353/ff.2011.0017.

¹¹ Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science*. Gabriola Island (CA: New Society Publishers, 2016).

¹² Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

only itself.”¹³ The love inherent within such a relationality is a Lordian erotics of love as power when introduced into an ecological context.¹⁴ To exemplify the potential embodiments of a relationality defined by erotic ecology, I will discuss how Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, the earth-body sculptures of Ana Mendieta, and the work of artist Heidi Hatry construct the kind of creative-critical emergence that can happen when ecology and the body as critical revelation conjunct.

The Vegetarian

Yeong-hye, the titular vegetarian of Han Kang’s novel, lives in an oppressive and unhappy. Since childhood, she has carried with her the dream of becoming a tree as a way to escape her life. In the novel’s first line, her patriarchal, abusive husband remarks: “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in everyway.”¹⁵ This statement defines their married lives until, one evening, Yeong-hye has a violent dream. In it, she consumes an exorbitant amount of raw meat while haunted by a face that shifts between her own features and that of strangers. Yeong-hye’s husband wakes to find his wife clearing out their fridge of meat. Yeong-hye’s descent into *anorexia nervosa* is then paired with her mounting desire to become a tree, subsume her body to the natural world, and escape the deeply patriarchal and

¹³ Andreas Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, trans. by Rory Bradley (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017).

¹⁴ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*.

¹⁵ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian* (New York: Hogarth, 2015), 1.

abusive social sphere she has thus far lived in. Current scholarly discussions of *The Vegetarian* center translation theories and Smith's contested decisions as a translator,¹⁶ its reception in a global audience,¹⁷ and cultural studies.¹⁸ Further attention has been placed on feminist narratology and world building,¹⁹ on eco-tuned interpretations,²⁰ and embodied theories of sister relationships.²¹ Each of these discussions supports my thinking on this novel, but my main interest is in exploring the novel's ecofeminist possibilities, specifically how such possibilities inform the novel's embodied trauma of Yeong-hye's experience with *anorexia nervosa*. I engage with Yeong-hye's character as a narrative-level metaphor for the potential to metamorphosize into vegetal being. Sara

¹⁶ For more information on *The Vegetarian*'s reception as a translated text, see Sun Kyoung Yoon's article "Deborah Smith's Infidelity: The Vegetarian as Feminist Translation." After *The Vegetarian* won the International Booker Prize in 2016, some scholars have argued that Deborah Smith's translation misrepresented and mistranslated the original text even though Han Kang approved the translation and shared the prize equally with Smith. Sun Kyoung Yoon analyzes the specific translation choices that Deborah Smith made in order to emphasize the feminist undercurrents of this novel. This writing concentrates most on how the character of the sister, In-hye, was made to appear more feminist than the Korean version, in which she upholds traditional patriarchal standards in her life. Sun Kyoung Yoon, "Deborah Smith's Infidelity: The Vegetarian as Feminist Translation," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 8 (2021): 938-48. doi:10.1080/09589236.2020.1858039.

¹⁷ Dominic O'Key, "Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and the International Booker Prize: Reading with and Against World Literary Prestige," *Textual Practice* 36, no. 8 (2022): 1262-88.

¹⁸ Margarita Carretero-González, "Looking at the Vegetarian Body: Narrative Points of View and Blind Spots in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," in *Through a Vegan Studies Lens: Textual Ethics and Lived Activism*, ed. Laura Wright (USA: University of Nevada Press, 2019), 165-79.

¹⁹ Rose Casey, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62, no. 3 (2021): 347-60, doi:10.1080/00111619.2020.1841725.

²⁰ Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, "Who Comes After the Woman: Becoming-Plant in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," in *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments*, ed. David Callahan and Anthony Barker (Cham: Springer, 2019) 99-112.

²¹ Joori Joyce Lee, "Touching Surfaces: Gestures of Love Toward the Wounded Sister in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 39, no. 2 (2020): 329-47; Caitlin E. Stobie, "The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 4 (2017): 787-802.

Ahmed's theory of willful female characters provides insight into Yeong-hye's character in this regard by describing the decisive ways such a character acts out their particular will in opposition to or in accordance with the general will of the narrative world.²² Ahmed links women characters that are "too big for their plot" to the relegating of women to the "background" of a text when they give up their will to adhere to the moral expectations of their societal context. However, Yeong-hye as character is the plot, setting, and narrative metaphor through my reading of *The Vegetarian*, and her will does not care about being in the background or lost among the metaphorical trees. It is Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law, and In-hye, the other three narrators of *The Vegetarian*, that exist in an entirely separate plot that does not attempt to contain Yeong-hye, thereby allowing Yeong-hye to remain as willful as she pleases in a second narrative space apart from the influence of others.

Bewilderment, Response, Relation

This writing asks me to consider relationality in the theoretical contexts I engage with. Rather than standing fully within ecofeminist theory, I propose incorporating theorists, artists, and writers not traditionally associated with ecofeminism. This results in a broader sense of relationality that challenges ecofeminist tradition at the same time that it models one of the core beliefs that ecofeminism is constructed upon: Engagement with a deeper, wider awareness of one's environment through theory and writing. I want to write about how relating to the self, relating to the body, and relating to a surrounding

²² Sara Ahmed, "Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character," *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 234.

ecology are all facets of the same affectual response invoked by responding to a piece of literature or art. An erotic ecology requires as much. To embody such a relationality, this writing engages with Stephen Moore's practice of responding in kind, or replying "to a narrative text narratively, writing a critical text that is no less visceral than the text is purports to read."²³

In order to relate and respond in kind, I foreground a theory of bewilderment based on Kevin Quashie's writing in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Bewilderment in this writing therefore means the act of confronting nature, the present moment, and the emergence of counter-cultural ideologies that threaten norms of relationality, society, family, and sexuality. In the act of bewildering I am reminded of my context, why I write in the way that I do, and why I seek to relate to critical method as revelation.

My authority in this writing is then constructed and contextualized by what I am able to say about my own body's response to *The Vegetarian*. Within this response is an acknowledgment of the complexity of the mental state of *anorexia nervosa*, its nuances and lingerings. I certainly do not extend the relationship I once had with this state of being to what it is like, in general, as it is always and again an iteration of personal investment in the body. I can only ever write about this state from how my body once related to it. I talk of my dispositions towards trees, body borders, dreams, and methods of inhabiting a space as a way to inform the embodied textual space of my response.

²³ Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 43.

Chapter One

At the edge of the forest is my dream journal, the roots tagged with (1) black ink for entries retelling a dream in which the narrative was substantial enough to recount fully, or a dream that was a decompression of the day, relating to specific events, or (2) pencil for dreams mood-orientated, unsettling, or surreal. It is always a foggy dusk in my dream journal, the spaces between each letter a gloaming tunnel: conveyance as form, a suggestion at the edge of bewildering. When returned to in a few days, the entries are often so hard to parse that I engage with the dream as if it were a poem. Two quotes taped to the wall above my bed guide me in this engagement. The first, from CAConrad: “Every poem is filtered through the circumstances of the poet, through the diet of the poet.”²⁴ The second, from Weber: “If the poetic act is a manifestation of wildness, language is our everyday wilderness. It is a system of creation and relation, which nourishes us, which limits us, which constantly changes.”²⁵

Before I begin the day, I record my dreams so that this dream journal is a means of stretching relationality, displacing waking reality a bit longer. This affect of displacement is necessary for dreamwork *to work* in literature, as Hélène Cixous suggests: “In dreams and body our writing is alive: we either use the whole of it or,

²⁴ CAConrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2012), 2.

²⁵ Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, 95.

depending on the dream, a part. We must embark on a body-to-body journey in order to discover the body.”²⁶ In analyzing Clarice Lispector’s writing through *The School of Dreams*, Cixous speaks of everything starting in the body. She suggests that by reading with the body the body “paragraphs,” or, makes indentations, connections, and thematic arcs of its own accord, like an intuitive crucible in which markers of relationality can provide guidance on how to map the interaction of a text and a body. To better perceive this paragraphing, Cixous instructs her students of *The School of Dreams* to begin with imagery, “A scene with a picture,”²⁷ to enter writing about dream writing by arranging the dreamwork of a narrative into the body’s paragraphing.

The dreamwork I am interested in is the short scenes of Yeong-hye’s first-person narration in Part 1, “The Vegetarian.” It is the only time her voice is heard in its own words. She seems to be speaking to her husband Mr. Cheong at times, other times her I reads like a diary entry, still other instances as if she is speaking to a therapist or confidante. Regardless of audience, her I retains the power of choice in taking her dreamwork to be *work* by becoming a vegetarian, radically altering her own life as well as the lives of the other characters in the novel. “The dream’s enemy is interpretation,”²⁸ so if I want to start responding to Yeong-hye’s narrative dreamwork along Cixous’ path, then we must take her instruction and let the dreamwork verb.

Yeong-hye’s first dream as she describes it:

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 65.

²⁷ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 8.

²⁸ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 107.

“Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I’m lost now. Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I’m inside. Long bamboo sticks strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there’s no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.

Somehow a way out. Running, running through the valley, then suddenly the woods open out. Tree thick with leaves, springtime’s green light. Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell that delicious smell. Almost painfully vivid. The babbling stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbap. Barbecuing meat, the sounds of singing and happy laughter.

But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don’t let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood.

Chewing on something that felt so real but couldn’t have been, it couldn’t. My face, the look in my eyes... my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar...nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling.”²⁹

Conjugating Declension

What draws me to Yeong-hye’s first-person narrated dreamwork is the possibility of discussing dreams as narrative devices. To allow this dream to verb,³⁰ a close reading of Yeong-hye’s first dream may be paragraphed along the narrative throughline of blood. The violence of Yeong-hye’s dream centers blood, gorging on raw animal flesh, and the

²⁹ For this writing, I respond to quotes, words, and phrases from the English version of *The Vegetarian*, translated by Deborah Smith. With this in mind, my response is certainly limited to the English-speaking audience of this novel, but is nevertheless in conversation with the original text through the medium of the translator and the fact that Han Kang publicly supports Smith’s translation. Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 18; Sun Kyoung Yoon, “Deborah Smith’s Infidelity: The Vegetarian as Feminist Translation.”

³⁰ M. Nourbse Philips models such a consideration of the creative potential in grammar and narrative declension in *The Declension of History in the Key of If*, in particular her “Parsing Model I.” Philips’ essay approaches remembrance, memory, and acceptance through a grammatical parsing of potential. M. Nourbse Philips, “The Declension of History in the Key of If,” in *Letters to the Future: Black Women, Radical Writing*, ed. Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy Martin (Tucson: Kore Press, 2018), 310.

isolation of being physically distanced in a social environment that should otherwise provide warmth. This dream models how one woman's decision on what to allow into her body can radically alter the lives of her family members. Yeong-hye begins acting in the novel only after the dream, a dream that comes from the subconscious, the instinctual, a place seemingly outside the borders of patriarchal and societal domination. The dream, and thus the desire to act with agency, comes from within Yeong-hye herself rather than the external structures that have since repressed her with violence. The origin of this dreamwork is immersed in violence and, as Rose Casey suggests, "In each of these increasingly breathless episodes, Kang represents Yeong-hye's subconscious as shaped by her sense of terror and confinement, as well as by her fundamental human carnivoracity."³¹ This is reflected in the violence of the dream itself, suggesting the Yeong-hye's body-mind connection cannot suppress the violence she has experienced any longer.

Moreover, there is a violence of self-relation and self-identification within the dream that, when confronted by Yeong-hye, becomes the main impetus behind her decision to become vegetarian and metamorphosize into vegetal being. The ambiguity surrounding who the face belongs to in the dream is challenged repetitively and within successive sentences, suggesting how quickly Yeong-hye jumps between recognizing herself and not recognizing herself: "my face... undoubtedly, not mine... so familiar." Within the dream it is unclear how Yeong-hye is seeing the face she questions; her perspective is not known. She cannot be viewing the action of the dream as if hanging

³¹ Casey, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*."

above the scene, as the chewing she experiences is visceral. No mention is made of a mirror or other reflective surface. The dream itself is the mirror.

As a reflective surface, Yeong-hye's dreams show her the action of her own memories: violence, blood, obligation. Such an ambiguously violent positionality to her own self hides Yeong-hye behind the words of the text so that the necessity of conveying her character to the reader becomes the work of her dreams and their narrative impact. The verbs Yeong-hye uses in relating her dream describe solitary actions. We may run or chew in unison with another person, but never *with*, not fully, implying that this dreamwork may exist as a parallelism of relationality for the other characters of *The Vegetarian* – but is always ultimately Yeong-hye's own.³² Yeong-hye's hidden character is beyond the edge of the forest, over a threshold of social relation, and rests in the trees of active bewildering and accumulated dreamwork. Such verbing allows us to center Yeong-hye's body while still, frustratingly, being kept apart from it.

The dream's verbs suggest an expenditure and replenishment, a metabolism.³³ At the housewarming dinner not long after this initial dream, In-hye's argument for Yeong-

³² Rose Casey writes that readers of *The Vegetarian* “largely gains access to Yeong-hye's consciousness through other characters” as Han Kang's narrative choices force her readers to engage with Yeong-hye through the way she relates to others, and how that relation influences the other characters' choices, desires, and actions in the plot. Casey, “Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*,” 354.

³³ Victor Shklovsky provides an interesting frame for “the laws of expenditure and economy in poetic language” in comparison to those of “practical” language, which aims to convey the greater degree of mental effort in the least amount of words. This is different for poetic language, but where both sets of language converge is in their ability to defamiliarize the reader in the most effective way: defamiliarize, or bewilder, the reader out of automated responses and into a new mode–mood–of perception. This awareness, when incorporated into this reading of *The Vegetarian*, suggests to me a waking-up and bewildering quality to In-hye's statement, as well as a need to digest the implications of her words through the embodiment of responding in kind. Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 11.

hye to resume eating meat, and eating more in general, is not so that she will gain weight or appease her husband Mr. Cheong, but so that Yeong-hye will have energy. This sisterly exchange happens moments before Yeong-hye attempts suicide surrounded by her family at the housewarming barbeque. In-hye says, “Everyone needs a certain amount of energy while they’re alive. Even priests who enter the temple don’t take their austerities too far—they might be celibate, but they’re still able to live active lives.”³⁴ For one, this foreshadows In-hye’s involvement in Yeong-hye’s vegetal sexuality and her husband’s obsession with having sex with Yeong-hye, as discussed in the next chapter. It also reveals In-hye’s bias towards celibate beings: they *may be* celibate but they *can still lead active lives*, a kind of passive aggressive statement that those who are asexual or celibate need to make a greater effort to be “active” in their lives. This suggests that the main drain on her own energy is the sex she gives to her husband. And, possibly, suggests that In-hye is aware of Yeong-hye’s refusal to have sex with Mr. Cheong and is quietly, circuitously, giving her advice on how to mitigate the situation: Don’t be restrictive in both eating and sex. If you eat, and feed your husband well, attaining a desired celibacy is more likely to be allowed to you. This is sister-knowledge operating within the strict patriarchy of their family unit and reveals which sister relates more strongly to that patriarchy. It suggests a willfulness in chosen expenditure as the only – or, the most immediately effective – defensive mechanism against abuse.

³⁴ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 42.

Yeong-hye's dream ends with a "vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling."³⁵ In the OED, and among a plenitude of other interpretive meanings, one etymological engagement with "uncanny" suggests someone or something that is not to be trusted.³⁶ Yeong-hye is preoccupied with the uncanny faces of her dreams while her husband and the brother-in-law maintain that it is Yeong-hye herself that is dangerous.³⁷ Naturally, and considering that this is dreamwork verbing, a bridge forms between valley and uncanny – uncanny valley. Given the contemporary discourse surrounding the "uncanny valley" effect and its evolutionary implications,³⁸ Yeong-hye's uncanny dream-faces, sometimes her own and sometimes strangers, imply a danger existent within familiarity: "Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible."³⁹ As she is in a mode of transition, her certainty of other humans is challenged – she no longer trusts the human faces in her dream, including her own. The familiarity of social structures, family, and gender roles are made bewildering as Yeong-hye's frame of reference for relating turns towards the vegetal and her wider ecological context.

³⁵ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 18.

³⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "Uncanny, adj.," accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.du.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/210106?redirectedFrom=uncanny#eid>.

³⁷ When speaking with Yeong-hye at her apartment, the husband notes that "Such uncanny serenity actually frightened him." Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 82.

³⁸ The uncanny valley effect was named by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori in 1978. Neuroscience researchers in the UK and Germany have discovered "mechanisms" in the brain that cause this effect. The study focused on humanoid robotics and androids, their uncanniness measured through emotional affect. The biological site of perceiving the uncanny is thought to be located in the medial prefrontal cortex, the seat of our valuation systems. This study implies that humans differ in how strongly we react to the uncanny valley effect, in other words, that the need to evaluate whether something is genuinely human is an evolutionary adaptation. Astrid Rosenthal-von der Pütten, "Neural Mechanisms for Accepting and Rejecting Artificial Social Partners in the Uncanny Valley," *Journal of Neuroscience*, doi: 10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2956-18.2019.

³⁹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 33.

The familiarity she questions refers to her uncertainty of “murderer or murdered”⁴⁰ within her dreams. She is uncertain of the identity behind the violence she witnesses. The violence is present in each dream, but it is not always immediately distinguishable who is enacting this violence. In her waking life, Yeong-hye enacts violence against the metaphor of her own body through her restrictive eating. She questions the inherent violence of her body’s form and its nascent ability to take the self-inflicted violence she pursues and turn it towards others: “Why are all my edges sharpening—what am I going to gouge?”⁴¹ The only place on her body that Yeong-hye sees softness is her breasts. She claims to only trust her breasts as she begins to rapidly lose weight and confront the implications of her dreamwork. She is at once suspicious of the violence her body is capable of while simultaneously admiring its softness and beauty.

Yeong-hye believes that she has accumulated the energies of the animals she’s eaten in her life, and holds this accumulation of ingested violence against animals as a nascent lump in the center of her chest: “Something is stuck in my solar plexus [...] The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there.”⁴² Not only does this make wearing a bra extremely uncomfortable for Yeong-hye but it further implies that Yeong-hye’s body is gaining an accumulation of otherness beyond solely human-orientated otherness. When Yeong-hye fails to wear a bra at a business dinner with Mr. Cheong soon after she

⁴⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 33.

⁴¹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 39.

⁴² Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 54.

becomes a vegetarian, the wives of the men present regard her with “curiosity, astonishment, and contempt.”⁴³ The outline of Yeong-hye’s nipples is offensive to both the men and women at the dinner. Moreover, Yeong-hye’s refusal to wear a bra becomes tied to her discomfort with the thought that the lives of animals she has eaten in her life have become stuck in her chest, imprisoned, in a way, by the cultural clasp of her bra. Yeong-hye's dreamwork then connects to the physical experience of being in her body.

Yeong-hye is not *only* herself as her dreamwork incorporates rapidly shifting, unrecognizable faces. She is not *only* human as she carries animals’ energies within her, then increasingly more plant energy after she becomes a vegetarian. Accumulation then becomes a matter of how violent one wants to make the energy of the body. On the first day of spring quarter at my university in Denver, I ordered a vegan burrito and was accidentally served a burrito al pastor. Because the ingredients were wrapped in a tortilla, I bit. According to the restaurant’s menu, this is what I accidentally took into my body: pinto beans, cheese, green salsa, onion, cilantro, chili marinated pork. When the waitress hurried over to explain, she gave me a new burrito, this one *definitely* vegan. For the rest of the lunch I let my friends talk around me and looked at some pictures they showed me, so unnerved at breaking over a decade of vegetarianism in a single bite that I could give them very few words back. I waited until I got home to be sick.

Accumulation is unavoidable as we recognize our own connection to our ecology as housed within, carried by, and metabolized by our bodies. As Yeong-hye’s dreams accumulate in their performative work, they materialize, find embodiment. Yeong-hye

⁴³ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 27.

confronts the exact scene the dream depicts of blissful outdoor meat-eating at her sister In-hye's housewarming family barbeque. Her entire family is poised and ready to force her to eat. They *must* witness meat passing her lips and going down her throat. They make a performance out of Yeong-hye's metabolism, the spectator reaching onto the stage and demanding what they want to see, demanding that nothing about the spectacle they make of Yeong-hye challenges their seat assignments in the audience.

The fear that Yeong-hye experiences in the dream is a result of wearing animal blood openly at a picnic, where families are ingesting the same blood as that of the "red, barn-like building" within the dream but in a more socially traditional form. Her fear confronts the reality of the distanced carnivore, the carnivore of capitalism and human-centric vocabulary, of the absent referent of meat-eating. Carol Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* develops the idea of the absent referent of animals when speaking about meat and extends this to feminist discourse.⁴⁴ Vegetarianism rejects, with the body, patriarchal structures and systems of dominance. Crucial to Adams' critical theory is a vocabulary that names relationships for what they are. "Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist"⁴⁵ as the language of the absent referent becomes a violent objectification of the bodies disappeared through language and food chain production. In perpetuating a vocabulary of absent referents we inhabit a distance from what we speak of, emotionally removing ourselves from blame. "The structure of the absent referent in patriarchal culture strengthens individual oppressions by always

⁴⁴ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: Continuum, 1990).

⁴⁵ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 51.

recalling other oppressed groups”⁴⁶ and thereby perpetuates not only systems of oppression but also the practice of how one group of humans relates with and refers to another. We use a language of metaphors and absent referents to obscure the actual violences we refer to, both towards living bodies and the body of the earth. Adams further shows how the absent referent of animals in our language around meat and meat-eating models that of the way we use language in reference to women and their experiences of bodily violence.⁴⁷ Rape, in particular, stands at the center of her argument, as several women she interviewed expressed their experiences as “feeling like a piece of meat.”⁴⁸ There is also a common enough expression in English on our treatment of nature that has been watered down enough with time and repeated use to no longer signify an immediacy in correction (both correcting the act it describes and correcting the language used): *the rape of the natural world*.

Both Yeong-hye and her sister In-hye experience marital rape in *The Vegetarian*. Their experiences are narrated from the point of view of the husband committing the act: Mr. Cheong in first-person and the brother-in-law in third. Reading each scene is a powerful commentary on the notion of the absent referent, as both women are obscured from having their experience related directly to the reader in their own chosen words, and highlights the danger inherent in using metaphorical language to mask violent acts. Adams criticizes (then-current) radical feminists for their failure to expose the violence in

⁴⁶ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 54.

⁴⁷ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 53.

⁴⁸ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 53.

connecting animals, women, and her theory of absent referents. Our vocabulary seems to slug along, and no one is surprised to hear the *rape of the natural world* as an expression used in casual conversation. (The character of Ian Malcom in *Jurassic Park* used it freely, openly, and to great emotional affect in the film, after all. That was 1993, the year I was born.) Like Adams, I wonder whether it is metaphor itself as a linguistic unit, act, and phenomenon that could be the foundation for systems of oppression and such violently obfuscating vocabulary.

I am unconvinced of the need for metaphorical language in discussing the body. I wonder if the body should take up the role of the absent referent in a different way: by actively being absent, by disappearing, and thereby stepping outside the purview of a masking vocabulary. To disable the power of metaphor implies a direct use of language, saying explicitly this is a *corpse* this is *rape* this is *not me*. When I speak of Yeong-hye as a narrative-level metaphor, I suggest that the violence of her dreamwork and the aftermath of that dreamwork on other characters confronts the use of metaphorical language in narrative.⁴⁹ As an example, I refer back to Adams' absent referent and her belief that the use of more direct language in describing exactly how the animal about to be consumed is killed, butchered, and dismembered "disables consumption and disables the power of metaphor."⁵⁰ Such destabilization of metaphor would allow for the truth of

⁴⁹ Here, I consider Monika Fludernik's understanding of metaphor as an aspect of narratology. Fludernik challenges the heretofore separation between metaphor and narrative, instead arguing that metaphor has the potential to work at the level of narrative: "The metaphor assumes narratological importance because it creates, on the linguistic level of the whole text, powerful and all-embracing structures which not only feature in the discourse but are also crucial to the overall symbolism of the novel, operating at the level of the story (plot and setting) as well." Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 74.

⁵⁰ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 63.

both language and the act to become unavoidable for anyone talking, eating, or writing about “meat” – *corpses*. “That we refer to meat eating rather than to corpse eating is a central example of how our language transmits the dominant culture’s approval of this activity.”⁵¹ When this was written, Adams could and did argue that vegetarians were by and large a quiet corner of most societies (with certain ones exempted, such as devout practitioners of some spiritual practices). But I’ve been a vegetarian for over a decade and the city I currently live in has not only several vegan-only restaurants, but vegetarian and vegan options on most restaurant menus. When I visit family in Manhattan and Queens, there’s a vegan spot on every corner. Friends in Brooklyn often go weeks without eating at a place that serves meat. The popularity of veganism has changed some of our colloquial language, but not all. We still use “veal” instead of what it actually is. We are still comfortable with “meat” and “steak.” Plant-based grocery companies call their soy isolate or pea protein or what-have-you products: Fake meat. Fake meat is the reason that, when I bit into the pork burrito, I did not question the taste: I thought it was, simply, fake. This absents the animal twice over and is helping no one change our harmful metaphorical language. Not only is it “meat” when, clearly, it *is not* related to animals dying, being dismembered, and then consumed – but more than that, it is fake. These nuggets and patties and sausages are labeled fake “meat” as the best possible marketing technique to get people to buy it. It works. I know many people who have only been able to pursue veganism or vegetarianism because of the relatively new availability of fake “meat” at the grocery store or on menus. These products are only palatable

⁵¹ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 77.

because they continue to refer to corpse-eating in some way, like a carryover, a balm, a lessening of the transition between omnivorous consumption and veganism.

As a body in a dream, a body wanting to be a tree, a body thinning itself out as antagonistic to its social context, Yeong-hye's character disables the metaphor of an ill woman in society by focusing her metamorphosis towards vegetal being while also serving as an overarching metaphor for the entire narrative of *The Vegetarian*. Her body becomes the need for the incorporation of an erotic ecology, and the usurpation of systemic models of oppression, into a new way of ecologically-situated, eco-attuned, eco-relating being.⁵²

The “I” Speaking

While the nature of the dreams modulates, the core themes of the verbing mechanism remain the same: movement, faces, seeing, identity. Yeong-hye's waking life is inconsequential in comparison to these dreams as her own gaze has turned inward while the gazes of others remain on her body, which sharpens, becomes a hard outline. Yeong-hye's I is set apart from the rest of the narrative as it is designated by italics. Further, it is pitted against the first-person narration of her husband Mr. Cheong in “The Vegetarian.” In this way, Yeong-hye continually disappears, into her dreamwork and off the page, when Mr. Cheong's I steps in, an act of disappearance I have loved since first reading this novel because it doesn't let her get hooked. Her I comes as if from an

⁵² Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen expand upon Adams' previous assertion to attest that the only method for theory work is an ecological one: “How we categorize and interpret the world around us has much to do with out context which in turn shapes our understanding, explanations, and interpretations of the world.” Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 4.

entirely different plot, moving alongside that of *The Vegetarian*'s overt plot events, and her willfulness in disappearing is captured in the narrative decisions that Han Kang made for this section, seemingly landing on the exact art of writing about a performance that Peggy Phelan's ontology of performance theorizes: "The act of writing towards disappearance, rather than the act of writing towards preservation, must remember that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself."⁵³ Yeong-hye finds subjective expression through her continually disappearing I. This disappearance is enhanced by the fact that when her I arrives on the page it is to retell a dream, which disappears from memory, which nevertheless leaves its mark on her and those she engages with. Like Cixous, Phelan and Rebecca Schneider use performance theory to foreground the body and its disappearances as a viable site of knowledge: "We understand ourselves relative to the remains we accumulate."⁵⁴ Performance leaves a remain in our unconscious, our emotions, and our bodies, similar to the way dreams exist in a state of simultaneous "vanishing" and unfolding. Jean-Luc Nancy says that, "the presence of a sleeper is the presence of an absence"⁵⁵ and embodies the "most genuine" form of self-autonomy because the willful self is completely detached from relation. Upon waking, relation rushes back, and asks us to choose how to cope with relating to our entire ecological context.

⁵³ Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance" in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) 148.

⁵⁴ Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 6, no. 2, 100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792>.

⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 15.

Disappearance as a narrative form pushes *The Vegetarian* into a specifically feminist narrative style. According to Ellen Peel, embodied forms of “unnatural” narration become feminist when they disrupt reader expectations in such a way as to pose the question of how a patriarchal worldview can be destabilized on the page, allowing Yeong-hye's disappearing I to become an act of narratological bewildering. “The issue of self and other, subject and object, has particular urgency for women in a sexist society: women are subjects, but patriarchy constructs them as objects. Alternating narration provides one way to represent the problem.”⁵⁶ This is modeled in *The Vegetarian* through the alternating first person narration in “The Vegetarian,” but also the alternating points of view in the second and third parts of the novel told, respectively, from husband, brother-in-law, and sister. Peel’s understanding of character as informed by her theories on feminist narratology allows for (1) more nuance in what a character is “allowed” to do for a novel from within a novel, and (2) emphasizes how the “strangeness” of a character and the narration of a novel coincides with a fluidity of interpretation that introduces avenues of rethinking feminisms and the bodies of characters on the page. The accumulated influences of oppressive social systems confronts the performance of accumulation within dreamwork, and Yeong-hye’s first-person narration suggests not only the connection between the physical body and interiority but also how the aforementioned systems shape that connection.

⁵⁶ Ellen Peel, “Unnatural Feminist Narratology” in *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016), 87, <https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.8.2.0081>.

A Ritual of Preoccupation

Ritual can be a means of divining how to inhabit a space. With what tools and mementos, with what language, with what intentionality. How we engage with the needs of our bodies can become a ritual: mealtimes, what foods we choose to eat, bedtimes, what we need in order to fall asleep. What we need in order to wake up. Though suffering from severe insomnia in “The Vegetarian,” Yeong-hye nevertheless does sleep in snatches, and each time returns to the same dreamscape of blood, animals, and violence. Returning ritually to the space of one’s own interiority through the phenomenon of recurring dreamwork implies a closed affect circuit: Yeong-hye’s emotions, and the decisions she makes based on those emotions, depend upon her interiority.

Ronald Grimes suggests that engaging in ritual and responding to the environment are optional, but once engaged with, the use of the body in ritual models the concurrent healing of nature’s body and the female body under duress (i.e., Yeong-hye’s restrictive eating). “For attitudes to become definitive they must be cultivated by practice”⁵⁷ and by ritualizing an occurrence or returning to a preoccupying thought, change can be accessed on a personal and spiritual level. Grimes says that biogenetic structuralists – those who believe in ritual’s “adaptive import” as part of our neurological system – emerged as an adaptive behavior that “is crucial for both the control and the transformation of consciousness.”⁵⁸ It is a means to achieve integration of the self with healing and

⁵⁷ Ronald Grimes, “Ritual Theory and the Environment” in *The Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (2003), 33. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00449>.

⁵⁸ Grimes, “Ritual Theory and the Environment,” 37.

relationality. Like disappearing in sleep, like Phelan's ontology, "Ritual exists properly, fully, in the performing of it."⁵⁹

Cyclically, I return to Cixous and ways of responding to her writing as a ritual of giving voice to my own inner forest. My favorite quote of hers is written on a piece of slightly beige paper and kept in a teakwood box on my altar. It reads: "Confession treats ritually what is absolutely untreatable."⁶⁰ Her words ask me to consider my relationship with confession and the possible avenues of healing that unveil themselves when I finally write about what my body has accumulated in memory and contour. Though Cixous prefers avowal to confession in the search of truth/death, her linking of confession (*Yeong-hye's I narration*) to ritual (*her return to sleep*) to untreatability (*her need to escape her current mode of life*) allows such a confession to evoke the Cixouxian "erasure" of Yeong-hye from the text. The act of confessing the ritual of her dreams gives a lexicon to her process of diving the space she occupies both externally and internally, and in so doing, suspends the reader in a state of *textual* lack as Yeong-hye's body grows hungrier, *lacking*. As the novel progresses, Yeong-hye's I steps completely outside of the plot events of the novel and the other character's influence.

Incidentally, my dreams changed when I started sleeping alone in an apartment across the country from the nearby dreams of my sisters and mother, who I shared a house with until moving to Denver. I began keeping a dream journal in March of 2022, six months after the move. There are more colors in my dreams, now, than I remember

⁵⁹ Grimes, "Ritual Theory and the Environment," 40.

⁶⁰ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 41.

having with my family nearby. My dreamwork seems to move cautiously. I write in a short story that I catch stranger's dreams through open windows while sleeping and I don't think this is entirely fictional. I write in a short story about my late grandmother's framed picture of the pope that hung above her stove, eating grease and countertop cleaner as confession wafers.

Through this process of accumulation and dreamwork as a confessional for one's interiority, my engagement with Yeong-hye as character and metaphor takes on the outline of an erotic ecology. Framed as such, an ecofeminist reading of this novel must then divine the shape of what an erotic ecology can offer for our relationality to other humans, other beings, nature, and art. Once divined, the shape can be filled.

Chapter Two

1: Seven of Pentacles: The lingering into which I descend is bloody. As in now I cannot expect consistency from the blood my body accumulates as cushioning. Cling to this bloody lingering with resentment. Keeping itself unknowable, unpredictable, so that I may not again be allowed to disrupt the hunger that keeps moving the technology of my hormones.

2: Ten of Wands: I have no outline of what it was to return to menstruation after years of carving myself into smaller forms, gleefully and terribly, no date, no emotion to conjure as memory. A body in want is cold. Radiators can be disquieting or carry relief. But must always be turned on. Whenever it was that I returned to the sight of my blood the sensation did not take purchase in my mind, or was perhaps purged, it slipped away, I could say such a memory may still be holed up coagulating along the edges. Stacking into a cliff. Imagine a dumbwaiter. Slick guide rails that allow no purchase. Hand brake stalled.

3: Eight of Pentacles: I am maddened by this level of inconsistency, of privation, that my body uses against me. The ritual my body tries to find again will not settle. Remains this wild thing untouched by the moon and its tidal patterns. What else pulls on my blood other than wanting more blood and another cycle. Hunger irrepressible

insatiable is at least a consistent sign for my blood's arrival. There is no reasoning with this form of hunger and the expectancy it carries. Once I considered that all my irregular expectations were not unlike a form of devotion I told the rosary underneath the memory of my grandmother's evening voice, the soft one of bedtime stories and bedtime songs, told them in an apartment far away from Tremont St., (the) Bronx, NY. Returning halfheartedly to her Catholicism just to say *hey, how about, I remember, the moment, I came, to, myself, again?*

4: King of Swords: Of eating: I meant to be a cog with many spokes but chiefly one of love and one of desire lingering around me, I mean actual desire, for a weather outside that is not too far below freezing. Lingerings like each other. Their nature is to accumulate. I wish they'd rectify. Memory slugs along during and after restriction, making scathing, indiscriminate choices over what is and is not kept, casting a filmy veil over what sticks around, munches holes into what I held before restriction, too, as if my body has only one time: always within the throes of this. Expectantly purging memories each hormone cycle because my body had no accumulated blood to purge instead. Obsession, like lingering, balloons time, conflates.

5: Six of Pentacles: I gave up in 2015 and started a journal to let my memories live in a series of mismatched notebooks rather than risk them to my unwilling archive. I draw on the page a crescent moon, with its sliver of light hiding a larger gravity, my

blood sitting in a sling between my hip bones, the paradox of an extra weight to lose when that weight was never gained in the first place, only redirected.

6: Judgment: The morning of my period in November 2022, while I'm thinking over how to discuss blood and menstruation in this writing, it is snowing outside. I fill a cup with snow and let it linger on the counter, intending for it to last the duration of my period, a sextant for the currents moving inside me, of blood and hormone and an unpinning longing. I don't realize the cup has a small leak. Snow puddles. Water bubbles out onto the gray counter, makes of itself a new outline. I leave the cup and puddle there, hesitant to clean up such spillable nature.

7: The Sun: This morning I read: "The only destiny we are born with is that of the ritual" in Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, page 119. Born to a ritual of the body that keeps its own calendar. A destiny unavoidable. My own house. Knowing both anemia and restriction my body sometimes confuses the source of its symptoms. A letting of the metabolism. A clearing, cleansing, confusing, change.

8: Page of Cups: I expect to be heard through this blood. Somehow there is always space inside me. This I discover while out drinking with someone I think I could love eventually. Thinking that existing in an anticipatory state is intoxicating. For a long time now I've known I only ever feel anything at extremes, so trying to catch the pendulum's pass in the middle of restriction and expectation is this entire project. It's everything I do with my hands, eyes, mouth, voice, legs, it is literally everything about me. Trying to still this endless sweeping swinging from side to side.

9: Nine of Swords: This chapter has taken longer than I intended to write. So I am in New York for the holidays, in my childhood bedroom, sitting on the edge of my bed

with an edible quietly churning my mind over like a river coming to rest. So much of my bloodless years was spent in this space. Medicine for my kidney stones is still in the drawer of my bedside dresser. Brand FloMax that, at the time, was not approved by insurance companies for young women; it was meant for older men, to dilate the ureter. It cost my mother and I weeks of working overtime to pay off the credit card bill we used for the copay. My bedroom bends around and away from me. I'm twenty-nine, sixteen, twenty, nineteen.

10: Ace of Wands: Desire is not a photograph. It is water. Like all my metaphors, it is water, the ocean, being pulled taunt or rushing forward. When a friend arranges my Celtic cross and we read the ten tarot cards together, I know everything they refer to, if quietly, and the current I see is the same one I've had since returning to my blood and returning to desire: that want in a body post-hunger is an oceanic thing. Ebbing. Rushing in. Predictable in most ways but susceptible to storms. Or is it this way for everyone? Why can't I make a ritual of it so that I can have a border around my actions, definable purpose and intent? And not entirely the reward of being healthy again – no, the decision is always, do I want to live in this shaky desire or would it be better to find another renunciation.

Vegetal Metamorphosis

I know what Yeong-hye is eating. This I can relate to. Her food is listed in great detail in the first part of the novel and is then transformed into a weapon against her for the remainder of Han Kang's writing. Yeong-hye's new vegetarian cooking aligns with her husband Mr. Cheong's dissatisfaction: "What I was presented with now was a sorry

excuse for a meal.”⁶¹ Of course, he does not start cooking for himself, as his plate is inconsequential to the novel. Instead, Yeong-hye and her plate are the gravitational center of *The Vegetarian*, a black hole that is only known by its outline and effect on nearby entities. Her material form, thoughts, emotions, and metamorphosis are kept away from both the reader and other characters as an embodiment of lack. The characters lack insight and readers lack a description of this metamorphosis. Yeong-hye’s physical weight is the obvious referent to this proposal of lack, especially considering the narrative’s preoccupation with a symptomology that remains consistent across narrative modes.⁶² Through vegetarianism she becomes a source of metaphorical weight, of discursive weight, for the entire narrative.

Though this metamorphosis is never clearly stated, Yeong-hye’s body must be read at the level of narrative and in conversation with the stories of the other characters. The metaphor of Yeong-hye’s body “...assumes narratological importance because it creates, on the linguistic level of the whole text, powerful and all-embracing structures.”⁶³ So, I read her as having successfully metamorphosized without the reader, or the other characters, *needing to notice*. This is not the kind of flagrantly material metamorphosis Kafka wrote of, but rather one that encapsulates Weber’s statement: “Metamorphosis belongs among the foundational principles of an erotic ecology.”⁶⁴ This

⁶¹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 20.

⁶² In switching from first person alternating between Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye in Part 1 to third-person limited in Parts 2 and 3, Han Kang’s connective tissue is Yeong-hye’s physical weight loss: her body, its modes of consumption, and its metabolism act as the ecofeminist potential in the narrative’s metaphor.

⁶³ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 74.

⁶⁴ Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecologi*, 99.

ecofemmed metamorphosis is hidden. It is a dream, a recurring ritual, a performance that, once noticed, disappears.

In discussing the nature of Yeong-hye's dreamwork in the preceding chapter and the manner in which it brings her to vegetarianism and eco-attunement, an essential aspect of Yeong-hye's feminine body must be considered when we reach Part 2, "Mongolian Mark": her period. The movement of Yeong-hye's blood, like her dreamwork as a communal phenomenon, is a relational throughline in the novel intent on creating a trans-corporeal, ecological metaphor of her character. The dream that instigates her vegetal metamorphosis is above all bloody. Full of violence, dead animals, blood on her hands, blood in the air. When, later in the text, she stands on her hands in an imitation of a tree, she makes her blood descend. The imagery of this resonates so strongly with her sister In-hye that In-hye dreams of Yeong-hye as a child, narrating her handstand:

*"Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide..."*⁶⁵

These words come to In-hye between sleep and wakefulness, as Yeong-hye often appears to those around her in the relational dreamwork of the novel. When the brother-in-law, In-hye's unnamed husband, begins to dream of Yeong-hye's body, it is not flowers that he imagines coming from her vagina, but sap, and after he has sex with her

⁶⁵ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 131.

the sap he imagines on his penis is black.⁶⁶ That her body in “Mongolian Mark” purges *sap* from itself according to the perspective of a man unhinged with desire is suggesting her period. He is seeing and engaging with the beginning of her having a period that is *vegetal*, a mark of her hidden metamorphosis. Sap can be taken as the blood of a tree. Yeong-hye’s sap-period is full of nutrients, minerals, phytohormones that regulate development and growth (womb nature), and sugar. Sticky, sucking, adhesive. Sap carries nutrients to new buds of a tree, it is involved in flowering, birth. “Bleeders” are trees whose sap is red, looks bloody.

There is the threat of sap hardening.

The leftover. The disposal of blood.

The cleaning.

The metamorphosis at the end of each period. A new egg. Spring sap.

Commodity. Bottling sap. Spreading over waffles.

Strange, that we use chainsaws to hack trees in half, release their sap.

Strange, the chainsaw’s original use was to carve up the pelvic bone of a woman during childbirth, release a life through symphysiotomy.⁶⁷

A new egg as a new iteration of woman.

⁶⁶ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 101.

⁶⁷ Around 1780 or so, Scottish doctors John Aitken and James Jeffray cobbled together a knife and hand-cranked chain as the first iteration of a chainsaw for use in childbirth. The mother’s pelvic bone was severed from its grounding cartilage in order to widen the pelvis and allow childbirth. Symphysiotomy is still used as an alternative to Cesarean sections in some areas of the world, though the tool has evolved, become unchained. Women can walk again, with assistance, in 2-4 days. General recovery takes around two weeks. Scar tissue permanently enlarges the pelvis. This procedure was especially popular in Catholic countries in the eighteenth century, like Ireland, though no one in my family knows anything of symphysiotomy performed on a woman among my County Kerry ancestors. People took note of how effective such a tool was for the act of severing. Turned to trees. Hand-crank to mechanized.

Perhaps Kang uses sap doubly in the novel. It can reveal Yeong-hye's disappeared, absented metamorphosis at the same time that this metamorphosis is not allowed to become human-gendered through gendered blood. Instead, this metamorphosis invokes the natural world by emphasizing Yeong-hye's budding vegetal being as it is situated in relation to an erotic ecology. For Audre Lorde, *eros* is "the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony"⁶⁸ that acts as a source of power in reorientating oneself to a new mode of relationality. Yeong-hye's determination to adapt her understanding of relationality and the body depends upon reading erotics as *eros* as ecological.

Han Kang proposes a new sense of relationality for Yeong-hye in accordance with her metamorphosis into vegetal being. Relation requires two entities and a medium of communication – sap, sticky and sucking, acts as that medium when she has sex with the brother-in-law. Such a metaphor for relation attempts to draw the brother-in-law *into the vegetal* as represented by Yeong-hye's sexual body, draw him out of the patriarchal, anthropocentric, and gendered. Moreover, this relation of vegetal sexuality moves the narrative forwards at the same time it disappears Yeong-hye's need for radical dreamwork: Yeong-hye discovers that this new, vegetal sexuality soothes the violent urgency of her dreams. The flowers the brother-in-law paints on her body stop the dreams from coming.⁶⁹ She sleeps well, again.

⁶⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 55.

⁶⁹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 102.

No one asks after Yeong-hye's period. If she experiences amenorrhea as she drastically loses weight, we have no idea how she feels about it or when it occurs. Because of the way my body has been, the distinction between bleeding and not bleeding is forever occupying my mind. My investment in a novel relies on placing value on throughlines: from Yeong-hye's body in disparate parts of the novel to my own. This identification prompts me to ask of fictional women: *What are you eating, when is your period?* And I expect a response.⁷⁰

By "Mongolian Mark," and despite the brother-in-law remarking that she looks healthier in the two years following her attempted suicide, the possibility of impregnating her never arises in his fantasies. The only mention of pregnancy in the novel is given through Mr. Cheong's brief mention of expecting children in "The Vegetarian." Before Yeong-hye's dreamwork usurps her body's ecology, Mr. Cheong is expecting a child out of their five-year marriage.⁷¹ An appalling connection is thereby drawn between her sudden series of violent dreams, weight loss, and withdrawal from society to an expectation of motherhood.

The brother-in-law considers Yeong-hye to be the embodiment of 'femininity': "This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated [...] what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented."⁷² The ability to invoke desire is presented as

⁷⁰ Not an answer.

⁷¹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 12.

⁷² Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 90.

life. The brother-in-law cannot conceive of a body's form and its accompanying manifestations of desire unless they are conventional. Rose Casey writes "Here and elsewhere, Kang presents Yeong-hye's brother-in-law as frustrated that a woman's desire is directed not toward him, but at her own ecological intertwining: at her urge toward radical interactivity with plant life."⁷³ The brother-in-law considers Yeong-hye's worth to be analogous to her body, and Yeong-hye stripping herself of "conventional" desire through restrictive eating is bafflingly unnatural to him. The brother-in-law's main concern is access to her sexual being despite witnessing *her suicide attempt* and drastic weight loss. What she struggles with mentally, emotionally, and physically does not occur to him as worthwhile to think about. He is consumed in flagrantly objectifying and sexualizing her, so much so that her metamorphosis into vegetal being is completely lost on him. He wants her. That's all. Her objectification by the brother-in-law reinforces the performative nature of this section of the novel as "the disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance."⁷⁴ The brother-in-law's desire makes her an Object of Art, but in trying to capture her-as-Object on reproducible film, he necessarily fails.

Additionally, this reading opposes a Butlerian feminine phenomenology that relies upon an understanding of performative, *iterative* gender-defining social acts "as constituting that [gender] identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief."⁷⁵ *Gender* and *object* become the illusion in vegetal nature instead of identity. Vegetal

⁷³ Casey, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," 351.

⁷⁴ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 147.

⁷⁵ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology Theory" in *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 520, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>.

phenomenology exists outside of the subject/object dichotomy in a third, liminal space that explores the vegetal as alternative to the norm, as another pathway for expressing desire and sexuality, as a way to ungender. It resists the social discourse that Butler proposes to be irrefutable⁷⁶ and builds upon the ecofeminist relationality that I propose here.

Losing the Body

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law is obsessed with turning his fantasy of two bodies painted with flowers having sex into what he brands a non-iterative artistic performance that clumsily tries to perpetuate his illusion of access to what he perceives to be her sexual being. This fantasy is challenged by Yeong-hye's vegetal nature, as the brother-in-law cannot distinguish whether she is "human, animal or plant."⁷⁷ This is a problem for his irrational and insistent behavior as it is rooted in an uncertainty of how to relate to her. The tension between his impulse towards documentation and the shame he associates with that documentation turn me to Cixous' meditations in the *School of the Dead* on the "crime" of concealment and the need to "repress, forget and bury"⁷⁸ an action when in reality such characters desire exposure. His anxiety (*to repress*) around telling anyone of his project and of wanting (*to forget*) to film penetration is also an anxiety (*to bury*) of filming, and thereby acknowledging, a vegetal sexuality that undermines his personal connection to the primarily heterosexual, patriarchal worldview that he subscribes to

⁷⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology Theory."

⁷⁷ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 93.

⁷⁸ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 44.

(*exposure*). The brother-in-law's true fascination is with Yeong-hye's vegetal nature as his obsession with her and the concept for his film began when he noticed a Mongolian mark⁷⁹ lingering on her skin into adulthood:

The birthmark was thumb sized, imprinted on the upper left buttock. How could such a thing still be there after all these years? It didn't make any sense. Its pale blue-green resembled that of a faint bruise, but it was clearly a Mongolian mark. It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual.⁸⁰

This is the most important passage in the novel for understanding Yeong-hye's relational influence on the other characters and their respective storylines. It begins with an analysis of her physical body. Note *bruise* as a ghost of her past abuse at the hands of her father and husband. Then the passage moves into ecological narrative. Then, "Surprise." Uncertainty. Finally, the vegetal. The resulting work of this paragraph leads to dreamwork, with the brother-in-law being consumed by dreams of Yeong-hye's influence. It is the vegetal nature of Yeong-hye's body that lies at the root of the brother-in-law's desire to capture her on film having sex. Preferably with himself, but he initially elects his friend J to stand-in for him so as to maintain the persona of an artistic director a bit longer and prolong confronting his Cixouxian crime.

Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law enact different performances alongside one another during sex, the former to actualize her vegetal sexuality and metamorphosis, the

⁷⁹ A congenital birthmark common in a wide range of population that fades around the time of puberty. It is often blue or bruise-colored with wavy edges. Called "Mongolian" because German anthropologist Erwin Balz in 1883 wrote a report erroneously suggesting that the mark was most frequently found on children he described as being of Mongolian descent.

⁸⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 88.

latter selfishly grasping after a fantasy. While discussing sexuality and using Foucault's work as a starting point, Phelan argues that understanding conventional male desire as "speaker/performer and listener/spectator reveals how dependent these positions are upon visibility and a coherent point of view"⁸¹ when that point of view resides in a capitalistic and patriarchal system. The brother-in-law needs to make this overwhelming desire he has for the vegetal coherent by consigning it to a reproducible art form.

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law returns to her Mongolian mark and the image of vegetal sex that it conjures for him repeatedly. It is a magnetic illusion, a recurring dream in the same way that violence and an escape into the trees recurs in Yeong-hye's psyche, in the same way that my blood remains unreliable. Returning ritually to the same thought, obsession, or desire brings the celebrant closer to the space of arrival. Such an arrival asks, as Grimes does, how ritual suggests ways of inhabiting a space, be it a physical, mental, or emotional space. But because the brother-in-law does not allow the sap to infect him, he shows no character growth, no where to arrive at, only accelerating descent into his obsession. He is enmired at the bottom of the valley. Accepting Phelan's theory of non-iterative performance art then allows Yeong-hye's metamorphosis to become the embodiment of the ritualized flux of a woman's bodies in menstruation.

The body, as Phelan argues, is a site of loss and performative disappearance. In aligning this to the manifold problematic structures of the Western archive, Rebecca Schneider argues that the idea of performance as "disappearing" without remains confronts the fallacies of Western archival logic, which requires some sort of written,

⁸¹ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 163.

audio, or material record to remain within a physical archive for an occurrence to count as historical. Schneider argues that thinking with archival logic makes us “ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently,”⁸² overlooking different ways of accessing meaning or connection with a work of art. To *remain differently* is Schneider’s main point, that we should sidestep that which the archive claims to uphold and look to performance instead. Specifically, the performances of bodies: “Indeed the place of residue is arguably flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of enactment - evidence, across generations, of impact.”⁸³

In addition to the brother-in-law as spectator, *The Vegetarian*’s readers necessarily occupy this role as “the performative quality of all seeing”⁸⁴ enables the reader to read performatively and therefore disappear themselves into the world of the narrative. My body connects to Yeong-hye for the affectual familiarity of isolation, restriction, and dissociation. Reading in this way allows me to arrive at a connection to artist Ana Mendieta. Her body of work, and particularly the sculpturing of herself into a tree, models the kind of metamorphosis that Yeong-hye performs internally as a way to define her new vegetal self in a new relationality.

The life that Mendieta lived within her performance art resonates with the reading I present on Yeong-hye in that both ground explorations of sexuality and resistance to

⁸² Schneider, “Performance Remains,” 101.

⁸³ Schneider, “Performance Remains,” 102.

⁸⁴ Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance,” 147.

systemic dominances in their communion with and respect for the natural world. Painted on their bodies, brought onto the skin. Mendieta believed in universal animism and frequently took her body into the mud for art. Her life's work aimed to expose abuse against women and the systems of dominance that both women and nature share. The representation of her death in the archive as a controversy reflects how systemic injustice directly interferes with the bodies of women – remained or disappeared.

Mendieta's first earth-body sculpture *Untitled (Grass on Woman)* from 1972⁸⁵ depicts Mendieta lying face-down on grass with her back covered in vegetal matter. She has someone else photograph this sculpture, as she called it. Two people were involved, Mendieta and the photographer, much like Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law, but in the years following *Untitled (Grass on Woman)*, Mendieta moves away from involving others and begins making casts of her body to incorporate into various landscapes that she photographs herself. Mendieta's switch to photographing herself corresponds to a change in her understanding of the exchange between performer/spectator. By assuming both roles herself, Mendieta engages with a self-referential photography as "a tradition which functions to assure that the given to be seen belongs to the field of knowledge of the one who looks."⁸⁶ Only she knows herself and can therefore photograph herself, corresponding to Yeong-hye's hidden metamorphosis and the way in which her body resists the brother-in-law's intrusive gaze.

⁸⁵ Stephanie Rosenthal, ed., *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 77.

⁸⁶ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 160.

Mendieta constructed silhouettes of her form from “stones, soil, grass, flowers, moss, blood, pigments”⁸⁷ then inserted these silhouettes into a natural landscape. *Tree of Life*, 1976, is key both to Mendieta’s body of work and Yeong-hye’s embodied metamorphosis, with Mendieta using her own body to enter into the ecology of a tree, with two hands raised and mouth open in a posture of *asking*.⁸⁸ This was not performance art for Mendieta, but rather an exploration of a “paleolithic spirit,” from before the industrial age. She was adamant about not using nature for her own purposes, which she disdained in other artists working in and through nature.⁸⁹ Correspondingly, Yeong-hye’s mark is described by the brother-in-law as “something ancient, something pre-evolutionary.”⁹⁰ To reach back with the body, both intentionally by Mendieta and metaphorically by Yeong-hye, implies the necessity of deeply ancestral roots and a return to modes of relating to nature existant before industrialization, modernization, and the rise of our current systems of oppression.

Sculpture as a noun: “Originally, the process or art of carving or engraving a hard material so as to produce designs or figures in **relief**, in intaglio, or in the round” (emphasis mine).⁹¹ Bringing into *relief* implies a hiddenness to the subject under study, a revelation of what already exists inside. Being *relieved* by an action is a mode of healing,

⁸⁷ Rosenthal, *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 12.

⁸⁸ Rosenthal, *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 101.

⁸⁹ Rosenthal, *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 13.

⁹⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 88.

⁹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., “Sculpture, *n.*,” accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.du.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/173877?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=OuZIRt&>.

a resolution to chaos or conflict. In either sense, taking stock of how relief is working for Mendieta's body conjuncts with the hidden nature of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis. In it is the relief of discovery of vegetal being, a vegetal understanding of sexuality, and the relief at being able to perform this sexuality with a Mendieta self-referentially.

Sculpture as a transitive verb, in the 1800s, meant *transferred*.⁹² From one state of being to another. Performer to spectator. From one body to another, between subjects, between modalities of study, so that in sculpturing Yeong-hye's textual outline I transfer to photography to Mendieta's shadow on the ground in her piece *Spaces II*, 1978.⁹³ There is a void, a hollowing, a transference of Mendieta's energy onto the landscape as she stands behind the camera and photographs. Because Mendieta herself is the one behind the act of photographing she gives herself access to achieve a full performance of erotic ecology. Stephanie Rosenthal writes: "All her life Mendieta was torn between direct, bodily contact with the ground, clay, sand, water and rocks, on the one hand, and photography and film, on the other, which allowed her to document and to present her work in controlled conditions."⁹⁴ This act of transference, then, inhabits a ritualistic space, with Mendieta repeatedly moving between mediums and medias in order to capture the moment that she becomes her environment's ecology. Engaging with blood and earth matter as conduits for this transference emphasizes the visceral nature of Mendieta's work, its urgency and movement, a love for the viscera of the human body

⁹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "Sculpture, v.," accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.du.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/173878?rskey=wL1sW&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

⁹³ Rosenthal, *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 15.

⁹⁴ Rosenthal, *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 18.

and earth body combined. Mendieta expands this earthy immanence into ritualistic gestures towards Santeria and other forms of spiritualism in her *Body Tracks* series. Her mixed media includes animal blood.⁹⁵ Her movements include scraping and dragging her hands to create her outline on a white space, leaving the question of that white space for her viewers to encounter. Mendieta's *Body Tracks* was meant to publicize violence against women, expose it, bring it into the light for witnessing. Her friend and contemporary Carolee Schneemann discussed the impact of Mendieta's death on not only Mendieta's work, but her performance pieces and art. When she heard the news of Mendieta's death, Schneemann followed the dream instructions⁹⁶ that Mendieta sent her and ran out into the snow to make body tracks, "then I realized I wanted to stabilize [the tracks], to sustain it, so I gathered blood and ashes and what else, maybe there was red paint"⁹⁷ to create *Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta* (1986) as an act of witnessing.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ "Ana Mendieta Body Tracks (1982)," Hemispheric Institute, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl-collections/item/2689-ana-mendieta-body-tracks-1982.html>.

⁹⁶ More than trees and transference and prehistory connect Mendieta and the metaphor of Yeong-hye's character. Mendieta communicated these "dream instructions" with her friends and colleagues, relying heavily on dreamwork as an instigator of artistic movements.

⁹⁷ Carolee Schneemann, "Regarding Ana Mendieta," in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, transcribed by Raegan Truax-O'Gorman, 21, no. 2 (July 2011): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2011.607942>.

⁹⁸ Schneemann gives this insight into her friendship with Mendieta: "It was very important for Ana that when I came to her house, being tall, I could change her light bulbs," as Mendieta's fear of heights and her struggle with vertigo, Schneemann states, were well-known to her friends. The controversy surrounding her death and her life partner Carl Andre's arrest and acquittal constellate around the appalling defense he used in court: Mendieta's work itself was proof of suicidal tendencies. Schneemann, "Regarding Ana Mendieta," 186.

Ecofeminist Viscera

The menstrual blood I linger on is necessarily gendered as it is partitioned to certain bodies and performances of bodies that engage with the ritual of menstruation. Ruth Green-Cole writes that, “To read menstruation as ‘gendered blood’ is to recognize the ritualization of difference through cleansing practices, psychoanalytic classification, and other constructs that ultimately affect the position of women.”⁹⁹ Green-Cole references Butler’s essay¹⁰⁰ on female phenomenology, gender, performativity, and “sedimentation” as Butler argues that an “identifiable” female gender is one constituted from sedimentary social acts based on social norms, all rolled into a neat rock of performative nature. Butler’s understanding of performing gender is materialist, dealing directly with the physical materiality of “stylized” acts. Green-Cole reiterates materiality in her statement on menstruation as a marker of “the weaker sex and its vulnerability, lack of self-control, and natural biological state closer to base materiality.”¹⁰¹ In this sense, Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis is in conversation with a materialist and ecofeminist analysis of the false association drawn between women and the natural world in patriarchally-motivated situations. Mary Mellor writes about the bodiliness often assigned to women – they give birth, they bleed monthly – and how this bodiliness then

⁹⁹ Ruth Green-Cole, “Painting Blood: Visualizing Menstrual Blood in Art,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel, Breanne Fahs, et al., (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), doi: 10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_57.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”

¹⁰¹ Green-Cole, “Painting Blood: Visualizing Menstrual Blood in Art.”

allows them to be “seen as steeped in the natural world of the body.”¹⁰² By “natural world,” Mellor suggests that the cycles of a woman’s body can be compared to those of nature and that “the association of women with nature represents hu(man)ity's need to confront its own materiality.”¹⁰³ Gendered materiality is misconstrued as insurmountable because it requires a complete deconstruction of male/female gender binaries, to which ecofeminists such as Mellor argue that the false representation of a woman’s body being closer to nature reflects the patriarchal inclination to demote women and nature to inferior cultural, social, and biological roles. An erotics unconcerned with ecology.

But, I said I wasn’t going to gender.

Stacey Alaimo, in her book *Bodily Natures*, presents her theory of trans-corporeality as an aliveness “in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world.”¹⁰⁴ In this reading and theoretical framework, *more* can suggest accumulations of interconnections, the enmeshing of our material bodies with the present ecology surrounding us. Alaimo’s trans-corporeality is an emergent “alternative” to our current anthropocentric relation to the natural world. If we accept that our bodies are a site of transference and movement, Alaimo suggests that everything from social theories to gender constructs to economics would need to be reconsidered so as to better honor the fact that the natural world “is always the very substance of ourselves.”¹⁰⁵ Trans-

¹⁰² Mellor, “Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective,” 111.

¹⁰³ Mellor, “Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective,” 112.

¹⁰⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 4.

corporeality as Alaimo proposes it “marks a profound shift in subjectivity”¹⁰⁶ that seeks to challenge ecofeminist tradition, and feminism in general, for continuing to discuss binaries and thereby perpetuate them.¹⁰⁷ Trans-corporeality is a recasting of established ideologies and modes of being into an erotic ecology that gives ungendered “flesh” to our understanding of the natural world. Surrenders our flesh to our interconnected nature. Of all the ways to embody such a belief, Alaimo claims that “Perhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance is food”¹⁰⁸ as we ingest, metabolize, and transform substances from the natural world into energy. The material body is a performance that is never iterated the same way in disparate moments but rather depends on the state of our metabolism, what we’ve eaten, our ever changing and influenced trans-corporeality. The body is never static. Rather, as Alaimo proposes, the “viscous porosity” of our stomachs and the “mediating membranes” of our skin engender the performance of a materiality that becomes an ensemble rather than a soliloquy.

To reiterate the brother-in-law’s description of Yeong-hye’s mark, it is “pre-evolutionary” and “a mark of photosynthesis” that pushes Yeong-hye outside of *this* time, the brother-in-law’s, this society, this structure, this narrative, reinforcing her ability to conduct her own metamorphosis out of the reach of other characters and readers both.

¹⁰⁶ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Ecofeminist practice has long been concerned with revealing the harm of binaries. In addition to transcendence/immanence, these binaries include: male/female, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, master/slave, human/nonhuman, and others. Binaries reinforce oppressions and their associated systems by reinforcing difference as a means for subjugation.

¹⁰⁸ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 12.

Moreover, pushes her out of *this* understanding of being human. The mark that instigates the unfolding of her vegetal sexuality is trans-corporeal.

Before the brother-in-law attempts to pin down Yeong-hye's willful, vegetal sexuality, they engage in the non-iterative performance of painting flowers on her body. He tells her the flowers won't wash off easily. She wants them forever, anyway and obviously, so his instructions are unnecessary.¹⁰⁹ Following the root of the matter discovers Cixous and her questioning of metamorphosis in the *School of Roots*. She follows a trail of flowers down into the "core of the matter,"¹¹⁰ and it is flowers specifically that Cixous focuses on as representative of vegetal matter – and our "vegetable side" itself – as a visual aid to explore transference, blooming, pollen, rebirth. Yeong-hye's "core of the matter" is embracing a sexuality that gives her some measure of healing from her impulses towards self-destruction while presenting her with a willful escape route out of the roles she has too long occupied. Yeong-hye's actions, then, represent the possibility of what may happen when we extend ourselves willfully towards the vegetal. When her body is covered in painted flowers, Yeong-hye is at her healthiest in *The Vegetarian*, full of will, action, and *desire*, desire for sex, but also for life, for experience, for things outside of the narrow confines of her violent dreams and eating patterns. Desire as life, as erotic ecology unfolding. By following the root of Yeong-hye's awakened vegetal sexuality, we "are aiming toward disassembly, towards decomposition.

¹⁰⁹ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 154.

Perhaps flowers are our last human stage.”¹¹¹ With flowers on her body, Yeong-hye has reached this “last human stage” and her metamorphosis into vegetal matter is revealed as an act of ecofeminist agency.

On paint as an artistic medium, Green-Cole writes that “Paint has the capacity to evoke the body’s viscera, both internally and externally.”¹¹² The flowers painted on Yeong-hye’s body and the resumption of her period as a vegetal sappy period then evoke the “viscera” her body exudes by following her wilful metamorphosis into vegetal being.¹¹³ Artist Heide Hatry’s collection *Not a Rose* pairs around 101 contributing prose pieces with photographs of Hatry’s flower sculptures made using animal viscera and organs posed in a natural environment.¹¹⁴ This collection responds to the sexualization of flowers and their use as representations of feminine sexuality, gender, and the sexual body. Hatry writes:

¹¹¹ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 151.

¹¹² “While there are isolated cases of reverence for menstruation, many societies impose a strict set of rules about the visualization of menstrual blood in art and visual culture. Green-Cole examines these hegemonic and patriarchal codes controlling discussion, commemoration, or visualization of menstruation, which have been internalized by millions of women worldwide as negative and shameful. One of the main tools used to maintain menstrual stigma is to erase the presence of the scene of menstruation in speech, image, and representation...” Green-Cole, “Painting Blood: Visualizing Menstrual Blood in Art.”

¹¹³ Green-Cole’s discussion of paint highlights the history of associating paint with blood, as well as the more modern invocations of menstrual blood such as in Kubota’s 1965 Fluxus performance *Vagina Painting*, in which she nominally uses her vagina to paint (the paintbrush is actually attached to her underwear and is not inserted into her body, as it was made to appear). This is a performance on, through, and for gendered blood, an anti-Butlerian series of movements that is not socially constructed (menstruation as visible art).

¹¹⁴ On the back cover, Carolee Schneemann offers: “In *Not a Rose* nothing is actually as it seems to be...we are seduced by alchemical illusions”. When an illusion is associated with the sexuality/bisexuality of flowers, or otherwise their transference potential, Hatry’s entire collection becomes a metaphor for how to confront the dual issues of blind consumption and feminized sexual repression. In this way, Hatry’s collection is a performance piece identical to Han Kang’s novel, as if Yeong-hye’s dreams were collected into the shape of flowers and settled back into nature with a healing hand. Perhaps this is why Yeong-hye says: The flowers on her body stop the dreams from coming. Heide Hatry, *Not a Rose*, (Milan, Italy: Edizioni Charta, 2012).

In creating images of beautiful flowers from animal parts that most of us would find impossible to consume (even though we eat the flesh of those very same animals, most of them victims of mechanized mass slaughter, without a thought), I want to subtly remind my viewer that his or her every act of mindless consumption is an abdication of our moral and ethical substance – to arouse reflection where there had been mere reflex.¹¹⁵

Despite the bisexuality of flowers¹¹⁶ they are readily feminized and, with their main biological imperative in nature being seduction for pollinators, they have a strongly metaphorical, sexual impact when included in narrative. That Yeong-hye's sexuality awakens when flowers are painted on her body suggests a similar disabling of the conventional metaphor of flowers in that she carries flowers – carries seduction – on her skin while remaining linked to Hatry's concerns of the blind consumption of animals. Her blossoming sexuality is tied to vegetarianism.¹¹⁷

Yeong-hye willfully steps out of the confines of her expectant character and into the liminal space of a second narrative of metamorphosis. After she completes this wilful act she must reorient herself to a new understanding of relationality in sex, gender, and aliveness informed by her vegetal being. Quashie examines such a relationship between aliveness and relation by stating that “aliveness is constituted in repetition and therefore is unfurling, an experience one encounters rather than possesses,”¹¹⁸ thereby making

¹¹⁵ Hatry, *Not a Rose*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Hatry, *Not a Rose*, 137.

¹¹⁷ See also contributor Meredith Jones' entry in *Not a Rose*, entitled “Eat Flowers.” Jones lists several recipes that incorporate flowers into cocktails, risotto, salads, and a pavlova. To ingest a flower suggests ingesting metaphor, bringing externalized sexual discourses into the body and metabolizing them. While not discussed in this thesis, I look forward to exploring the question of what it might mean to think of sex through our stomachs in future work. Hatry, *Not a Rose*, 150-151.

¹¹⁸ Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 15.

repetition spark *ritual returning* and the stretch of a relationality over iterative instances of interaction. In orbiting around a definition for his theory of aliveness, Quashie posits relation as crucial, necessary, and inherent. An aliveness as Quashie postulates relies on being en-livened by relation with others. While Yeong-hye in essence socially interacts with her sister and brother-in-law in the later parts of the novel, her relationality arches over them to incorporate her entire ecological context, an entire wholeness beyond the anthropocentric.

To elucidate aliveness more generally and answer for Yeong-hye's post-metamorphosis sense of her own aliveness, I invoke Quashie and his discussion of the opening of Lorde's essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury." He describes how aliveness' ability to act as an apparatus of knowing is "the materiality of and metaphor for experience, experience that – at the site of knowing – is material *and* immaterial."¹¹⁹ Lorde's thinking paired with Quashie's aliveness locates the site of knowing in the body. The ritual performance of this knowing is aliveness. Quashie next turns to Toni Morrison's insight – "the body is a vehicle, not the point" – and extends this to "the [textual] body [as] a syntax for describing the aliveness of a human one."¹²⁰ Consciousness itself is presented in his work as the liminal "habitat" wherein transcendence and immanence "converge;" I argue that this convergence is a ritual, that by occupying the shared space of immanence/transcendence our aliveness comes forward through the ritualization of this convergence, its necessarily repetitive nature. If one is to inhabit both states

¹¹⁹ Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 18.

¹²⁰ Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 18.

simultaneously then distinctions between the external and internal collapse. Whether the sap that flows from Yeong-hye is materially present in the novel or not doesn't matter. Let it be dreamwork. It is real to her inner world, therefore real to her outer, and therefore an embodiment of her aliveness.

Both Quashie and I ground our writing on aliveness in the body and affect, as I am wholly emotionally invested in this writing and Quashie best understands aliveness as “poetic, an affective aesthetic beholding of being.”¹²¹ Aliveness cannot be fully represented. Yeong-hye is not fully represented. To relate we need the capacity to relate, says Quashie, and that capacity is determined by the degree to which our aliveness is a measurable, embodied radiance. “There is no *being* other than being-in-relation, no *being* other than being in aliveness.”¹²² Once Yeong-hye embodies her aliveness – her willful metamorphosis as representative of this new aliveness – she must *relate*.

Cixous questions where our borders are and what species we truly are by graduating her readers from *The School of Roots* with the open-ended question of how our body can be the place of questioning identification with our “vegetable side,” of the “overflowings” from that side and what it means for our relating to other humans. Yeong-hye's actions, then, embody what happens when we extend relationality and aliveness to the vegetal through an erotic ecology. She is healthier the more vegetal she is, her body is not as “gaunt” as it was two years previous, when the dreams began.¹²³ If In-hye hadn't

¹²¹ Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 19.

¹²² Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 23.

¹²³ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 79.

found her husband's recording of he and Yeong-hye covered in flowers, having sex, and hadn't committed her sister to a psychiatric hospital, then the novel and this reading would dissipate without the exposure of the non-reproducibility of Yeong-hye's vegetal sexuality. Instead, we watch her descend back into restriction when her willfulness, her vegetal sexuality, is forcibly repressed from the outside.

Chapter Three

By Part 3, “Flaming Trees,” Yeong-hye wants to become a tree. In-hye assumes the narrator’s role, with her experiences of Yeong-hye’s admittance and treatment in a psychiatric hospital alternating between her own recollections of married life, motherhood, and the dreams she experiences as influenced by Yeong-hye. I argue that it is this latter storyline, and not that of Yeong-hye’s treatment written in the present tense, that is the central plot of “Flaming Trees.” Yeong-hye has already completed her desired metamorphosis and lapsed out of pre-metamorphosis relation with every other person in her life. She cannot physically or emotionally engage with anyone else in her life as an adult woman – her vegetal sexuality, once blossoming, cannot stand underneath force-feeding tubes and confinement.

So, the focus becomes In-hye’s metamorphosis, or lack thereof. Its failure to take, quicken, run parallel.¹²⁴ The cyclical nature of *The Vegetarian*’s narrative structure is not unlike the cyclical turn of seasons, the cyclical nature of trees, menstruation, and preoccupying thoughts. “Flaming Trees” returns the reader to the same themes of bloody

¹²⁴ “Here, then, I repeat that the perception of disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism. The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception—that is, to make a unique semantic modification.” In-hye and Yeong-hye are directly contrasted with one another through this use of disharmony in parallelism. Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 21.

dreams, energy expenditure, and the absencing metaphor discussed in relation to “The Vegetarian,” with the space of ritual arrival dictated through In-hye’s narration.

Arrival

The Vegetarian begins and ends with bloody dreams. As In-hye begins to suffer from insomnia while her sister is institutionalized, she questions whether she isn’t beginning on the same slow path that Yeong-hye is on. She dreams of her own face with blood coming out of her eye.¹²⁵ At the conclusion of the novel, on the very last page, when the doctors’ give up on force-feeding Yeong-hye and send her with In-hye to the nearest hospital for a more invasive treatment, In-hye observes to her sister while riding in the ambulance: “Perhaps this is all a kind of dream,” with the memory of her attempted suicide in the forest glazing over the scene:

In-hye squeezes Yeong-hye’s shoulders. ‘Perhaps this is all a kind of dream.’ She bows her head. But then, as though suddenly struck by something, she brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye’s ear and carries on speaking, forming the words carefully, one by one. ‘I have dreams too, you know. Dreams... and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over... but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because... because then...’¹²⁶

The forest of In-hye’s dreamwork is not one she explores. The sisters’ bodies experience nearly identical physical symptoms of the desire for erotic ecology, to

¹²⁵ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 139.

¹²⁶ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 185.

different results.¹²⁷ In-hye as a parallel character to Yeong-hye requires her to have dreams of the same psychological import as her sister. Where the sisters differ is in how they engage with willfulness. For Yeong-hye, as Rose Casey writes,

...commitment to tree-life is less a choice than an imperative, it can be understood through Sara Ahmed's queering of the will. Rethinking this concept as embodied and errant, Ahmed describes it as "experiential": not as something we already have, but as something we come to experience ourselves as having.¹²⁸

Yeong-hye achieves this experiential willfulness through the dreamwork discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. Queering of the will can become an alternative method of relation that foregrounds an ecological perspective, a non-human-orientated theory of agency that echos the interdependency of Weber's erotic ecology as discussed thus far: "Yeong-hye's willed arboreality establishes an alternate model of sentient intertwining that undermines human-oriented philosophies of willfulness arising from disembodied theories of agency."¹²⁹ Rather than relying on idealism and "disembodied" agency, Yeong-hye physically stands on her hands to make herself appear a tree, she alters her diet, she makes willful choices that, had she not been committed to a medical institution that used force-feeding as treatment, could have resulted in any number of altered relational states. Considering that the novel ends ambiguously with the assumption that Yeong-hye will die for her willfulness and In-hye will continue in her

¹²⁷ Yeong-hye believes "Something is stuck in my solar plexus [...] The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there." In-hye echos this with a guilty conscious that sits as "a lump in her chest." Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 54; 148.

¹²⁸ Casey, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," 349.

¹²⁹ Casey, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," 350.

proscribed social role, the willfulness of both characters is *suggested* but not *resolved*. A bewildering state, when examined, and for exactly that reason it is alluring. I have certainly been allured by the states of these two sisters, enough so to fold this novel into my self and digest what it suggests about my own experiences, footfalls, and roots. This is why this novel matters to me. Because it allures, then leaves you to respond in kind to it.

A Boundary of Exhaustion

The Vegetarian begins and ends with energy as In-hye returns to the subject of bodily expenditure and its associated exhaustion. When first meeting her husband, In-hye noticed his perpetual fatigue: “What she’d wanted, from that afternoon, had been to use her own strength to allow him to rest.”¹³⁰ This relates to In-hye’s comments in “The Vegetarian” when trying to persuade Yeong-hye to eat more during her housewarming barbeque. It is energy, willfulness, the ability to move and act that seems to hold a moral imperative for In-hye’s character. She speaks of “exhaustion” as a mother, business owner, and primary income provider to her family, yet takes no physical action to alleviate her own exhaustion. In In-hye’s role, strength is not physical capability, but carefully managed energy expenditure and renunciation of her will to the perceived exhaustion her husband experiences. From their first meeting, In-hye’s relationship with her husband is dependent on this tension of energy and renunciation. When I lay beside someone, our contours close, their hand across the ramp of my belly and their chest a

¹³⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 135.

riverbed for my hair, how do we speak, how do we share, how do I always manage to sleep better when I fall asleep imagining that there is, actually, these two sets of contour lines in my bed? And not just the remembering of what is forgotten: The ritual of falling asleep encased.

Among the menagerie of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned* are the Amazon river dolphins, the boto dolphins, that when stolen into captivity are believed to suffer from sleep deprivation to the point of death. Gumbs says, "I think this question of sleep is crucial...rest is resistance and sleep is political. Systemic nightmares threaten our sleep."¹³¹ The boto dolphins are thought to need the slope of the riverbed to sleep, so when brought into captivity and left to float in unsupported water, sleep deprivation sinks them. Through these dolphins, Gumbs questions the nature of rest and sleep as methods of resistance and alchemical sites of intense inner change. Gumbs and the figures she evokes demand that rest and sleep be recognized as necessary for "freedom to evolve"¹³² from the pit of consciousness.

This exhaustion and resistance towards rest makes In-hye all the more bewildered by her sister. Quashie's understanding of the bewildering potential within written work foregrounds some event or some utterance "where the word means not confusion but being taken out of one's sense of commonsense—being made wild or being lured into the wild."¹³³ This luring is something that In-hye recognizes between herself and her sister.

¹³¹ Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico: AK Press, 2020), 89.

¹³² Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, 90.

¹³³ Quashie arrives at this understanding of bewildering and an aliveness in literature through a close consideration of Terrance Hayes poetic aesthetics in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 61.

In-hye considers what she might do because of Yeong-hye's trajectory in the novel, and why she resists such luring:

“She was no longer able to cope with all that her sister reminded her of. She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there.”¹³⁴

To perform a close reading of this paragraph, I isolate five resonant phrases or words that In-hye uses in relation to her sister to ground my conversation of their relationship. This allows me to arrive at an understanding of what In-hye wants and loves, as well as an acknowledgement of what this understanding contributes to my overall engagement with the parallelism represented by the sisters in *The Vegetarian*.

“Unable to cope”

Yeong-hye's choice of coping mechanism is confronted, her anorexia is acknowledged for the harm it does to her body, and In-hye must acknowledge that her own body requires gentleness and care beyond the abuse, overwork, and marital rape she experiences throughout the novel. Additionally, In-hye must cope with Yeong-hye's body as the narrative-level metaphor for the form of vegetal being that In-hye actively resists. Yeong-hye's distance from both the reader and her sister in “Flaming Trees” accentuates her character's function as a narrative-level metaphor for the possibility to engage with vegetal being, eco-attunement, and erotic ecology.

¹³⁴ Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 146.

“Soaring”

In the final scenes of “The Vegetarian,” Yeong-hye is shown to have mutilated a small bird during an episode of psychosis. Witnessing this psychosis compels her husband to divorce her, as if the body of the bird allowed her to soar out of her marriage and into a space of transformation. By “Flaming Trees,” Yeong-hye is associated with flight and groundlessness. The notion of flight, birds, and the performance of escape brings me to Cixous’ chain: “A chain of associations and signifiers composed of birds, women, and writing.”¹³⁶ The chain relates to Yeong-hye’s bird, her as bird, In-hye’s observation of this bird-like nature, my own observation of In-hye’s observation. Cixous suggests that in writing “birds are forbidden because they are the root.”¹³⁷ In a similar way to the symbolic function of flowers in the novel, flight and the invocation of birds suggests the continued forbidden quality of what Yeong-hye represents in seeking a vegetal being.

“Soaring alone over a boundary”

The boundary that begins and ends with a body is encompassed within the wider ecological topography of a narrative. The verbs used in In-hye’s quote – to soar, to bring, to forgive, to shuck, to leave, to break, to know – all imply movement of some sort, be it physical, emotional, or intellectual. But it is always change and movement in the circuitry of the body, a dependency not unlike how Kathleen Stewart’s ordinary affects “pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldlings of all kinds.”¹³⁸ What matters is the direction of the current. Having glanced by erotic ecology and vegetal relationality with her own attempted suicide before returning to what society recommends for her by her sense of duty, In-hye’s affectual circuit is a closed one

exactly as Yeong-hye's, but with an opposite current. It returns upon itself, retains narratological continuity, and willfully resists confronting change.

“Forgive the magnificent irresponsibility”

Yeong-hye's state of lack (in actuality, her disappeared metamorphosis and the subjugation of that metamorphosis to incarceration in a medical institution) is the ultimate betrayal to In-hye who, though she considers following her sister down the same path, never does break her relation to the systems that control her life. I wonder: If Yeong-hye had verbally confessed her motives for her actions to In-hye more explicitly rather than metaphorizing them into a desire for tree-life, would In-hye have been able to better conceptualize her sister's turmoil and respond to it in kind? In-hye is traditionally responsible. She holds her roles as a wife, mother, and daughter in perfect harmony with societal expectation. As revealed in “Flaming Trees,” her main internal conflict is the worry that “she had never really lived in this world.”¹³⁹ “This world” being the social, cultural, and political discourse she adheres to, the one that Yeong-hye has forcefully left behind. In being unable to relate to Yeong-hye in the way she expects, In-hye's resentment and confusion towards her sister merely echos the resentment and confusion that In-hye feels for herself.¹⁴⁰

In-hye's sense of responsibility shepherds Yeong-hye into a medical ward, where she does not receive the treatment she needs but is force-fed and medicated according to systemic practices by doctors unable or unwilling to provide alternative care for her anorexia. While Yeong-hye's neglected responsibility to the needs of her own body was an attempt to escape the boundaries of her life, that body is only brought under the

purview of another system, one that repeats ignorance. There is no ecology in the ward, no therapists, no recognition of cycles, seasons, or the needs that different minds and different bodies might require in order to heal. Cixous states that she writes of the authors she does because they have either passed close to death or otherwise reveal truths so clearly and with such fearlessness that they mimic the threshold between consciousness and death.¹⁴¹ There is a responsibility for this type of revelatory function, this rehearsal of death, as Phelan would suggest.¹⁴² As In-hye notes, “It’s your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you’re free to do just as you like. And even that doesn’t turn out how you wanted.”¹⁴³ Even on the brink of death, Yeong-hye’s doctors never swerve from their treatment course, ignorant of the fact that she does not conform to their conception of who has authority over the territory of her body.

“Bring herself to cross”

Cross, valley, traverse, bear, bear upon, bear up, bear with. Here, In-hye acknowledges the necessary willfulness she would need in order to respond to Yeong-hye in kind. Sara Ahmed writes that “The achievement of character *is* the fashioning of a will, which is also described in terms of cultivation and application,”¹³⁵ then goes on to discuss how female characters tend to sacrifice personal will to social will. In-hye wants to have the same power of will as her sister, but ultimately knows herself well enough to resist being lured into a wild that would forever alter her to her greater circle of relations: husband, son, family.

¹³⁵ Ahmed, “Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character,” 234.

Love

What ecofeminism currently lacks are these ideas towards amending relationality that I have incorporated from theorists, writers, poets, and artists. They do not necessarily write about ecofeminism, yet convey what it means to be a living being in relation to a full ecological context. Weber writes beautifully that bewilderment and uncertainty are at the core of relation.¹³⁶ Yeong-hye's destabilizing dreamwork bewilders those in her life, makes them uncertain of her and uncertain of themselves, thereby opening a suggestion to them that they can perceive a greater relationality than the ones they are stuck in or adhere to. As discussed in Chapter One, Weber proposes aliveness as being something attainable through relation and love. This is a sentiment which, I think, Gumbs achieves in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons From Marine Mammals*. It is a mode of listening, responding, and disappearing so that the space may be occupied by the next person to desire a greater relation with animals and nature – and thereby better understand relation to the self and relation to other humans. For me, Gumbs' book is the best example of what ecofeminism could be right now, when aliveness, creativity, and reverence for our ecology conjunct into a seamless narrative exploring the boundaries of body and self through the lives of marine mammals. Every chapter explores an emotional need, discovers its embodied affect in a mammal, calls attention to connection and relation, and reminds us of the threat such relations can face from those unwilling to wade through such waters. And yet, she ends each chapter with love, which is maybe what I'm doing here in this writing, wanting to enunciate as clearly as Gumbs does:

¹³⁶ I acknowledge that the title of his work isn't *Matter and Desire*, which would make us parse the two as separate entities, but *Matter & Desire*. Weber suggests an & that keeps the two words as close as possible.

I love the parts of you that no one thinks are particularly special. I love the basic you of you unmarketable and everyday. I love to be around you because the round around you thrills me. And let's get together again soon. A whole bunch of us. I love you more than press conferences can say. Breach when you want to.¹³⁷

Furthermore, the notion of aliveness, love, and relation as *forces* not dissimilar from gravity helps to center perceptions of the body: The chest often feels love before words can speak it. I certainly had not said I loved who I loved aloud until long after my chest had begun tightening at the sight of their smile. Luce Irigaray argues for such sensory perceptions as a site of knowledge in *Through Vegetal Being*, a record of her correspondence with Michael Marder as they discuss the importance of turning, with gentle intent, towards the vegetal world.¹³⁸ On the body's knowledge, Irigaray writes: "Sensory perceptions then become dependent on human ideas or plans that cut them off from their living roots"¹³⁹ and speaks of witnessing nature as a meditative act.¹⁴⁰ In one of his responses, Marder talks of refuge in the vegetal world coordinating with the "reorganization" of our own lives: "Seeking refuge in the vegetal world, we return to it as refugees...reversing the direction of culture and reconceiving it as a loving cultivation of the vegetal world and of the living."¹⁴¹ This refuge is particular in that it dissolves

¹³⁷ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, 71.

¹³⁸ A connection is drawn between motifs of vegetal nature in Kang and Irigaray by Magdalena Zolkos, "Bereft of Interiority: Motifs of Vegetal Transformation, Escape and Fecundity in Luce Irigaray's Plant Philosophy and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," *SubStance* 48, no. 2 (2019): 102–8.

¹³⁹ Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 47.

¹⁴⁰ Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*, 120.

interiority and exteriority. It opens the pores of the skin to nature. It allows for Yeong-hye's desire for vegetal being and her impulse towards tree-life.

Weber and Lorde together expand my notion of love, one that asks for room to breathe outside of purely human-human interaction. "This is the essence of the erotic: All-encompassing and inescapable relatedness makes the world capable of perception, capable of learning, imaginative and sensory."¹⁴² To love to is to "tend our ecological attachments"¹⁴³ by understanding first how to respect those attachments. The only way I was able to cope with my grandmother's passing in August 2022 was to subsist on the remembered sounds of her. I hear from halfway across the country the seagulls that crowd the coast of Long Island (which she, admittedly, hated the sound of) and hang a simple peanut-butter-and-seed birdfeeder outside my window to attract what few birds roam around Denver in the winter. My grandmother is, strangely, birdsong for me now. And I let myself be surprised at this, at this unaccountable attachment to what I am writing about and grief my body has been squeezed through during this writing. They are not two things I thought would connect. But, ecologically, I am everything that is happening in my life and everything I hear. So I listen for what shapes my body. Even in utter human solitude in the mountains as I was last weekend, hiking as far as I could bear and chasing the high of being unattached for a day, solitude is truly impossible. I saw birds, trees, waded across the shallows of a brook, was touched by the wind, thought of my friends, of my uncle's recent diagnosis with Parkinson's, of what my mother inevitably ate for breakfast (rye toast with a poached egg. I would bet my entire savings

¹⁴² Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, 120.

¹⁴³ Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, 120.

on that because I ate the same, as I always do on days when I need more ground beneath my feet than the dirt provides). Bewildering happens in relation, in the midst of life, perhaps in the midst of a conversation or in the midst of a sentence. Weber's poetic precision as entry to an embodied unconscious rests in the moment that the unexpected becomes sacred, startling, and shockingly present.

For Yeong-hye, relation to an erotic ecology asks her to trust in ritual dreamwork and the performance of her interiority. She performs a feat of the body in reorientating herself to a more ecologically attuned mindset. She looks for healing in this erotic ecology. She looks for a new way to inhabit her body and relate to others. She looks for escape from the systems of abuse and oppression that have stifled her life. Her body in *The Vegetarian* becomes the site of this knowledge and a metaphor for the need for erotic ecology.

Afterwards

Much of this writing has asked me to be gentle.

My voice in this writing has not told of experiences, memories, or figments of my body that I have spoken aloud to another person who knew me during *that* time. Friends have gotten piecemeal bits, my family hardly anything. My cat knows the whole story. As do the trees at Southard's Pond trail in Babylon, NY, where I ran off so much anxiety and so much accumulated distaste for my own body over the course of years. On my social media profiles I list myself as "diarist" before writer, poet, prose-poet, or artist. On some days I do not think very far from the creased pages of my journals, their careful dates and timestamps for each iteration of writing, and will often run my fingertips over the curling pages, embossed with words pressed so hard into the pages that they raise, grow out of their own rootedness, soothing me with that rootedness.

In wanting to write this thesis in this way, I want love in the context of relationality, ecology, and the throughline of art that keeps me tethered to the unfolding process of healing. Engagement with the environment is a choice of how *to* engage. The same applies to ritual, dreams, to *The Vegetarian*, and to bodily healing. After completing this writing, I want to continue to work within accumulated love. I want to write in and out of the forest, straddle the border, respond, and relate. Holding love for a body that has known self-restriction and harm calls for nested cycles of acceptance. Today, I don't feel

strongly that I know my way through the forest. Last week: Clear skies. Relation is not static and I seek a permaculture of love, sustainable and conscientious rather than *still*.

When considering *The Vegetarian* and the power of Yeong-hye's character in the context of the ecofeminist reading I have proposed, my critical method of revelation for a wider, deeper sense of relationality suggests the continued necessity of responding in kind. While Gumbs is able to write from the first person and relate to marine mammals in a way that is healing, just, and proactive, Yeong-hye's desire for tree-life and being subsumed into nature is kept away from her. She comes close to a sense of healing in "Mongolian Mark," but her confinement in the psychiatric hospital stifles any revelation she may have reached through her combined dreamwork, metamorphosis into vegetal being, and her new understanding of sexuality. Han Kang's novel prophesizes what happens when real healing – from, through, and with the soul's ecology – is hampered by harmful systemic conventions. Where Yeong-hye arrives at the conclusion of the novel is unclear. Having performed her vegetal metamorphosis beyond the purview of the text and other characters, Yeong-hye is denied the space to express what it means to her to be confined by her sister. Her fixation is tree-life. It is a balm and coping mechanism, the last way she attempts to relate to her surrounding ecology.

Here I find myself with Cixous again. Her roots, her writing on flowers:

“If I have referred to these contingencies and overflowings, it is to emphasize that none of this can be done without the body. Our body is the place of this questioning. And what about the flower part of our body? I'm planting this question here and letting it grow.”¹⁴⁴

My body, the body of boto dolphins, the body of a tree.

¹⁴⁴ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 132.

Allowing hidden work to grow in its own interior forest requires that we perform work on ourselves to better love in and abide by the fullness of our bodies, enact rituals of relating to one another, and rest within an ecology that is defined by *eros*. To know the power of encountering as a bewilderment of the everyday. To know that the performance of interiority rests in what the body metabolizes.

When I arrived in Denver determined to read more thoroughly than I ever had before – as in, actively contextualizing my reading to the cycles of my body, the weather, the smiles of my new friends, my research – I wrote what I wanted to be the guiding question for my thesis statement on the inside of *The Vegetarian*'s front cover: *What is the vocabulary of pruning?*

What I desired at that time was to form a better of understanding of my body in a shape that would have been unrecognizable to itself a decade ago and what it meant to live and think in this body. What I needed, however, was not to prune back the memories of sharp angles and a narrow love, but to let myself dwell. What I have discovered by dwelling in and ritually engaging with *The Vegetarian* is that a desire for tree-life is not unlike the desire for love. That bewilderment grounds an erotic ecology in a series of accumulated moments. That aliveness means self-abundance as much as it means a commitment to relation beyond the simplified binaries inherent to patriarchy, capitalism, and all systems of oppression that lock a body in place and tell it how to be.

My Long Island accent clings to certain words, most ardently to “afterwards” –

“afta-woods.”

After-woods! says my friend at the bar we usually go to, with the drink she usually orders, with the laugh she usually gives me when home slips out from behind my lips.

I find I have arrived at a slightly skewed place from when I started writing this work. (As is usual with most ritual work that I perform.) I wonder how much of this writing will change through editing. Will the introduction hold any of my original hermeneutics? Perhaps, but need not. I suspect that responding in kind to a work that continues to challenge my fear of being seen is part of a healing I am still getting comfortable with. And how much this work has changed from a few months ago! Say, six months. Because, today, I'm writing as if I'm writing the next installment of an email thread between myself and a dear friend. This email-writing-voice comes out much easier today. I sit in the same apartment as six months ago but have since cut off 13+ inches of hair, bought a couch, forgiven a betrayal, and said goodbye to my grandmother. I think I will let this paragraph stand as it is though editing, remain it shabby. Remember what it means to be in the process of a ritual of relation. Could be my diary entry for today, April 13, 2023 (Thursday. 11:42 PM).

May this page breach through the edited, smooth, still surface of this work.

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