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Ecocriticism and the Trans-Corporeal : Agency, Language, and Vibrant Matter of the Environmental “Other” in J.R.R Tolkien’s Middle Earth

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores J.R.R Tolkien's Middle Earth in light of the material ecocritical notions of trans-corporeality, vibrant matter, and intrinsic language. Namely, this paper asserts that Tolkien's treatment of plants, specifically trees, deconstructs an otherwise unflattering and over-simplified binary that separates the natural world from the human, while highlighting important nuances sometimes overlooked in Tolkien's natural world. The two sides of this affixed binary, as this paper asserts, are intermeshed in Tolkien's conception of Middle Earth in what Stacy Alaimo terms a "trans-corporeal" process. The humanoid and nonhumanoid beings of Tolkien's world are constantly engaged in a process of mixing and intermingling that suggests a bodily and sentient unity in their interaction. Furthermore, this paper claims that Tolkien's natural world contains a multitude of agencies, empowering what has so often been otherwise treated as homogenous backdrop for the action of Tolkien's story. Lastly, Tolkien's use of language as it applies specifically to trees, or as is represented in his Ents, suggests a sensitivity to the agency of the vegetal, which is best formed in Tolkien's representing trees or tree-like bodies with access to language. The intrinsic, nonhuman language of plants helps add a greater sense of agency to what have so often been otherwise considered non-agentic and passive living creatures. Ultimately, the paper encourages thinking about Tolkien's Middle Earth as full of agentic and valuable nonhuman beings whose own bodies and language are constantly entangled with those of the humanoid. Furthermore, this paper ends by encouraging a break from the environmental imperialist mindset that so often governs existing readings of Tolkien and the natural world itself.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Ecocriticism and the Trans-Corporeal: Agency, Language, and Vibrant Matter of the
Environmental "Other" in J.R.R Tolkien's Middle Earth

by

Garrett Van Curen

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

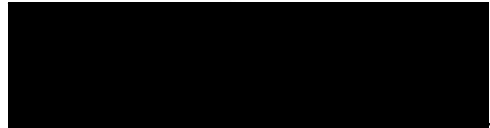
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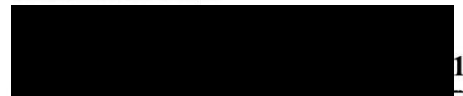
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ECOCRITICISM AND THE TRANS-CORPOREAL: AGENCY, LANGUAGE, AND
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1. Introduction

It is a critical commonplace that J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* presents a world in which morality is directly connected with the capacity to live harmoniously with nature. In a 1955 letter to his American publisher and in response to inquiries in the *New York Times*, Tolkien writes, "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals" (Tolkien, *Letters* 165). Tom Shippey recognizes this as an important component of what he calls Tolkien's "Green" ideology (Shippey 89). Humphrey Carpenter famously notes that Tolkien's mother Mabel taught Tolkien "a great deal of botany, and he responded to this and soon became very knowledgeable." Tolkien's love for nature went beyond the purely aesthetic (although his interest in landscape painting and sketching is well-documented) and he cherished the "shape and feel of a plant...this was especially true of trees." Tolkien "liked most of all to be *with* trees...climb them, lean against them, even talk to them (Carpenter 30). Tolkien's early interest in the natural world, especially connected with trees, no doubt held future significance for much of his writing, as trees and other agents of the natural world appear central to his very mythology. *The Quenta Silmarillion* is anchored to the destruction of the two trees of Valinor, an act of desecration often cited as one of Morgoth's foulest transgressions. Furthermore, Tolkien's *Rings*, which shall serve as our object of study in this paper, is also populated with trees of great metaphorical and mythic value.¹ As Patrick Curry explains, trees take "pride of place" in Tolkien's legendarium:

¹ This paper will limit its discussion to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. While Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and *Hobbit* could undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of Tolkien and the ecocritical lens this paper plans to pursue, these narrative registers differ greatly from that of *Rings*, and therefore, a combined analysis featuring these works would best be served in a separate analysis.

The Lord of the Rings begins with the old Party Tree and ends with a new one. (It nearly ends prematurely with Old Man Willow.) The tree that blossoms in the courtyard in Minas Tirith is a scion of Telperion the White, which with Laurelin the Golden is one of Tolkien's cosmogonic trees of life. In the internal mythology of Middle-earth, they embodied the first light of the universe, and before they died bore a great silver flower and golden fruit: the Sun and Moon...And, of course, Hobbits were not Tolkien's only unique creation; he also gave us Ents (Curry 53).

Additionally, as Susan Jeffers notes in her discussion on Tolkien's moral dichotomy, determining good and bad "in a system that rests on contextual relativity" is answered in "*The Lord of the Rings*...by demonstrating a paradigm in which morality is indicated and shaped by connection to environment" (Jeffers 7). In this moral system's simplest form, the fact that those who are charitable and care for nature are objectively "good," while those who abuse or disenfranchise the natural world are "evil," is conveyed through the characters we encounter throughout the *Rings*. The Hobbits of Middle Earth live idyllic agrarian lives in harmony with the natural world: Sam Gamgee is, after all, a gardener-hero; the Ents take action against a wicked Saruman who seeks to burn forests for the sake of industry; and the Elves, undoubtedly one of the most connected of all races to the natural world, impart language to the trees in the First Age. Additionally, Sauron's corruption is connected to the land of Mordor, which is devoid of plant or animal life and is a kind of industrialized and hellish wasteland.

And yet despite its apparent fixity, Tolkien's representation of the natural world is richer and more nuanced than has often been given credit when considering this moral dichotomy. His environmental space is more of an active player than a passive, aestheticized landscape used only

to mark the boundary between the civil and the wild, or the morally “good” and “evil.” Curry notes that “Tolkien does not romanticize nature...you can easily freeze to death, die of overexposure, drown or starve in Middle-earth” (Curry 52), nor does Tolkien make any “attempt to prettify ‘the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which are often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning’” (Curry 53). Additionally, the natural world of Tolkien, like a character all its own, has the power to act, to think, and to choose. We remember that Treebeard explains, “I am not altogether on anybody’s *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*...nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays” (Tolkien, *Towers* 461).

This essay asserts that a more nuanced ecocritical reading of Tolkien’s work is necessary to break the apparent and unfitting nature vs. culture binary that has so often been drawn to understand Tolkien’s humanoid agents’ interaction with the natural world. In so doing, we seek to demonstrate that Tolkien’s civil and natural figures do not stand in opposition to, or wholly apart from one another. Instead, they are crucially intertwined in an ongoing process called “trans-corporeality.” A neologism coined by ecofeminist critic Stacy Alaimo, trans-corporeality is as an “intermeshing” and “inter-dependency” between all human and nonhuman material bodies (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 3). This concept seeks to close the socially-constructed, conceptual gap between all living things by tracing the “material flows” between people, places and beings through analysis of interactions between bodies, environments, and language (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 9). The trans-corporeal relationships between human (or humanoid beings) and the natural world in Tolkien’s *Rings* seek to topple an otherwise top-down, hierarchical approach to understanding the natural world in which human beings are overlord. Instead, Tolkien taps into important power relationships that act rhizomatically and de-center the

human elements. In Tolkien's world, human beings do not control the natural world (benevolently or not) and the natural world does not control them. Instead, as Lawrence Buell notes in reference to an essay by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "'Environment is not an 'other' to us' but 'part of our being'" (Buell 55).

Alaimo goes on to assert that the human body and the material environment cannot be disentangled or disconnected. They are instead, trans-corporeal, which can serve as basis for "a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (Alaimo, "New Materialism" 187). This concept helps to break down the oversimplified notion of the nature vs. culture binary, which still dominates much of the critical language regarding environmental activism in Tolkien studies. The "porous" or "trans-corporeal" relationship between the material, natural world and the human body is one that favors an interdependence of agencies. Specifically, the vegetal bodies of our natural world are not merely inert objects to be consumed but are also active players, or what material ecocritic Jane Bennett calls "vibrant matter," who absorb and consume the agents of their environment like we consume vegetal beings in the process of the trans-corporeal. Likewise, Tolkien's world is one that elevates diversity, interconnectedness, and vegetal agency, while it rejects any form of supremacy or power relation that seeks to dominate. This notion extends to the natural world and the vegetal bodies of Tolkien's work, which are forms he values as equally important to those of his humanoid beings².

Lastly, this paper asserts that the key to understanding Tolkien's treatment of plants, particularly trees, and the natural world, lies with his use of language and, even more

² See Jeffers, who discusses the "interconnectedness" of Tolkien's world and notes his appreciation of "Otherness"...without objectifying that world" or solipsizing human thought on to that world (Jeffers 16).

specifically, within the realm of sign and symbolic construction. For example, many of Tolkien's tree and tree-like forms employ language mirroring elements of what many recent ecocritics have termed the "intrinsic language" of plants. This is to say, the language of plant-based organisms. As recent ecocritics like Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patricia Vieira discuss in their introduction to *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, many scholars have "begun to examine the relationship between environmental sustainability and human language, especially the impact of metaphors, tropes, and other figures of speech"; however, we still need to consider the way "intrinsic language - the modes of expressiveness proper to plants...influences the extrinsic language we deploy to represent vegetal beings (or the natural world more generally) in cultural productions" (Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira xx-i). The relatively new and developing concept of intrinsic language and the language of vegetal bodies provides a new lens with which to view Tolkien's nonhuman beings and their relationships with language in the novel. The clearest path to understanding Tolkien's forms of vegetal language rests with a firm grounding in the concept of nonhuman, vegetal agency. Therefore, it would be best to approach this discussion after having first established a clear vision of what plant agency looks like for Tolkien. We might do this by unpacking the apparent nature/culture binary in *Rings* and then highlighting the power of the trans-corporeal process, which elevates the vegetal form and calls attention to its active role in the meshing between human and nonhuman bodies.

2. On the Nature/Culture Binary

When considering Tolkien's *Rings*³, we are reminded that Man⁴, though given narrative privilege throughout much of the tale's telling, is a part of a significantly larger and much older system. Tolkien's legendarium is one that provides important context in this matter. We should remember that humankind is not Tolkien's sole concern. Instead, Tolkien often gestures towards Man's position in a much larger system in which living, nonhumanoid forces are just as valuable as Tolkien's humanoid figures; ultimately, both human and nonhuman life exist on the same plane. We need also consider that Tolkien's worldview is one in which Middle Earth functioned for eons before the coming of Man, who were the called the "Edain" in Sindarin, which literally translates to "the Second People." More overt nature-figures like Tom Bombadil and Treebeard, for example, come to represent Middle Earth in its earliest and most primordial, natural state. Bombadil is "oldest and fatherless" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 258), while Treebeard is described by Gandalf as "the oldest of the Ents, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth" (Tolkien, *Towers* 488). Even a man as seasoned and learned as Aragorn is astounded to hear that the Ents exist; "'The Ents!' exclaimed Aragorn. 'Then there is truth in the old legends about the dwellers in the deep forests and the giant shepherds of the trees? Are there still Ents in the world? I thought they were only a memory of ancient days, if indeed they were ever more than a legend of Rohan'" (Tolkien, *Towers* 488). All of this is to highlight Tolkien's apparent conception of Man as part of, and not necessarily as master over, the natural world.

³ This essay will focus solely on *The Lord of the Rings*, as the magnitude of involving *Hobbit*, *Silmarillion*, etc would present too great a challenge of analysis given the length of this essay. Additionally, as Tolkien's *Rings*' register differs greatly from that of Tolkien's other works (being his only true novel), involving other texts would require a discussion of narrative register, form, and genre, which exceeds the scope of this analysis.

⁴ This essay will use the capitalized "Man" in the Tolkienian conception, which is not intended to mean man in the gendered sense, but "Man" as akin to the Biblical usage, which is to say, "humankind."

There are things that even Great Men like Aragorn simply do not know, understand, or remember.

Tolkien's view of Man as a part of a larger natural system harkens to more recent ecological assertions that seek to un-privilege mankind in the dominant hierarchy. Eduardo Kohn's 2013 book *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* sets out to redefine the way human beings think about the study of anthropology in order to re-establish the conditions of anthropological study in ways that better contextualize human beings as parts of, and not dominant over, their environments. In Kohn's introduction, he highlights his search for an "anthropology beyond the human," in an effort to "contribute to posthuman critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as exceptional - and thus as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world" in an effort to develop "a more robust analytic for understanding human relations to nonhuman beings" (Kohn 7). This overt re-evaluation of mankind's ontological privileging itself over the natural world is one that stretches back to some of Donna Haraway's earlier work, perhaps most notably her 1991 collection of essays *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. In this feminist manifesto, Haraway paves an important path for discussion about the ideological split between the natural world and human culture and the ways in which this split could be rectified, most famously, with her cyborg metaphor. In her essay "Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic: A Political Physiology of Dominance," Haraway explores the way in which "natural knowledge" has become a tool of manipulation and a way for humankind to dominate and prioritize itself over the disempowered and, by extension, the natural world:

We have accepted at face value the traditional liberal ideology of social scientists in the twentieth century that maintains a deep and necessary split

between nature and culture and between the forms of knowledge relating to these two putatively irreconcilable realms...We have challenged our traditional assignment to the status of natural objects by becoming anti-natural in our ideology in a way which leaves the life sciences untouched by feminist needs. We have granted science the role of a fetish, an object human beings make only to forget their role in creating it, no longer responsive to the dialectical interplay of human beings with the surrounding world in the satisfaction of social and organic needs. (Haraway 8)

Haraway's criticism of a nature/culture binary is precisely what Kohn seeks to undo in his more recent work by "reflecting on what it might mean to say that forests think" in order to define the "connection between representational processes (which form the basis for all thought) and living ones as this is revealed through ethnographic attention to that which lies beyond the human" (Kohn 7).

Problematically, in the binary separating the natural realm from the realm of human culture, the latter is privileged while the former is made the simpler, the savage, or the less complex. We assume that the natural world cannot fight back, that it is apparently inert. It cannot communicate in ways human beings can as it does not have access to human language and therefore, it is considered separate, alien, opposed, and ripe for domination and exploitation⁵. Some of Tolkien's earliest scenes in *Fellowship*, however, appear sensitive to this colonizing mentality, in which the natural world is made effectively "other," a less complex realm that must

⁵ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* is one example that outlines issues of speciesism and environmental racism, founded on the earlier postcolonial concepts of othered figures; however, these concepts place the environment at the center of the issue, along with human beings who have been economically and socially disenfranchised in First World attempts to exploit and dominate the environment while often times toxifying the physical land "in the transference of ecological problems from their 'home' source to a 'foreign' outlet" (Huggan, Tiffin 4).

have order imposed upon it both for the good of those within the civil realm, and for the good of the natural realm itself. However, Tolkien's depictions complicate the culture/nature binary, thus allowing us to dissolve the constructed distance between the members of each camp: the human (or humanoid) and the natural realm, respectively.

One of the greatest moments of nature/culture dissolution begins with a close reading of the strained relationship between the Hobbits of Buckland and the Old Forest, an allegedly sinister yet remarkably agential, natural realm. Having just concluded their stay at Buckland, Merry, a Bucklander, recounts the "queerness" of the forest itself in an ominous warning prior to their entry. The forest, as Merry notes, "is queer" as it is "very much more alive, more aware of what is going on...than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 108). It is important to note Merry's language here. The trees are apparently conscious entities with agency and gravitas. This, for Merry, makes them "queer," a term with some resonance in Tolkien studies. As Yvette Kisor outlines, "queer" in Tolkien is an "identification of the Other, the different, as queer, as peculiar, as in some way suspicious" (Kisor 18). Ironically however, the thing that makes the trees "queer" is their familiarity, their ability to mirror human behavior and appear more like the Hobbits, who are famously, "shy of 'the Big Folk'" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 1) and inclined to suspicion of "Outsiders" who may prove "themselves a nuisance" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 10). This apparent connection that Merry unwittingly notes helps to dissolve some of the distance between the Hobbits and the trees, and by extension, the larger nature/culture binary. If the trees are capable of thought similar to that of the Hobbits, then perhaps they are more alike than the Hobbits care to admit.

Additionally, in the Hobbits' desire to control their land while maintaining an artificial boundary between their realm and the world of the "wild," the Bucklanders plant a massive

hedge, separating themselves from the Old Forest. Merry recounts that “long ago [the trees] attacked the Hedge. They came and planted themselves right by it, and leaned over it. But the Hobbits came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire in the Forest, and burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 108). The Hedge, a literal wall demarcating the homes of the Bucklanders from the wilds of the forest, occupies a precarious, yet distinct and enforced space. It is a living wall grown in an effort to maintain a border between the Hobbits’ society and the natural realm encapsulated in the forest. However, if we take the hedge as a distinct metaphor for the Hobbit’s desire to keep themselves separate from the natural world, thus encapsulating the nature vs. culture distinction, then this binary fails to hold firm upon further analysis. The line of demarcation is a soft border. The wall is, in fact, a living space unto itself. In planting a living wall, in which the material of its construction shares a kinship with the natural world, then we might consider it both physically and conceptually porous. The hedge can be passed through - the Hobbits must do so in order to enter the forest, after all. We learn that even after the great battle between Hobbits and trees that enforced the boundary generations ago, “[t]he Forest drew close to the hedge in many places” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 97) and the Hobbits of Buckland “kept their doors locked after dark,” which is “not usual in the Shire” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 97), suggesting an ongoing fear of encroachment, invasion, and porousness. The Hedge must be “constantly tended” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 97) or else it will grow into disarray, thus blurring the dividing line between Buckland and the natural world beyond.

We need also consider the physical and sentient action of the Forest itself in the previous scene recounted by Merry. The Forest is capable of emotive thought and action. The trees can like or dislike, according to their will. The “unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root

out, or grasp at you with a long trailer” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 108). They become “unfriendly” following the attack and make a conscious effort to retreat from the Hedge. Perhaps most importantly, the trees of the forest appear capable of their own forms of language: “I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 108). The trees’ capacity for language here demonstrates that Tolkien’s vegetal bodies possess agency not unlike the agency of Men or Hobbits; in fact, the trees have an apparently perceptible language, recognizable as language by humanoid beings who listen. Hobbits know that the sounds they hear are “whisperings,” and not merely unintelligible noise. Illustrative of the same point but in a later episode, Legolas appears able to tap into some form of communication with the trees of Fangorn when he explains to Aragorn and Gimli, “I catch only the faintest echoes of dark places where the hearts of trees are black” and where there is “no malice” but “watchfulness, and anger” (Tolkien, *Towers* 480). Legolas’s penetrating ability to “catch...echoes” seemingly emitted from the vegetal bodies around him suggests the trees communicate complex emotions like “watchfulness” and “anger” in subtle ways. Connections to the trees in a reciprocal and language-based process is only the start of greater discussion we shall broach later in the Fangorn Forest episode. However, what is most important here is the way Tolkien continually manages to unravel a truly porous binary through a heightened sense of trans-corporeal connection between vegetal and humanoid, especially once the Hobbits enter the Old Forest.

In this conception, “the Forest” is not chiefly a unified or homogenous entity. Instead, upon closer examination and within the light of the porous boundaries between the natural world and the cultural, the Forest is more of a multitude. Tolkien calls attention to the very non-uniform nature of the trees as the Hobbits enter deeper into the forest; “Looking ahead they could

see only tree- trunks of innumerable sizes and shapes: straight or bent, twisted, leaning squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and branched” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 109). We might call attention to more overt forms of this process of individualization in *Towers* when we meet Treebeard and many of the other Ents arriving for the Entmoot; “The Ents were as different from one another as trees from trees: some as different as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; and some as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir” (Tolkien, *Towers* 468). Illustrating this attention to difference, the Ent Quickbeam is described as “one of the younger Ents” whose voice “was higher and clearer than Treebeard’s” (Tolkien, *Towers* 471). Quickbeam, also unlike Treebeard, who is fonder of pensive poetic recitation, “often laughed” and took greater delight in his surroundings, laughing with an uncontrollable mirth “if the sun came out from behind a cloud” or “at some sound or whisper in the trees” (Tolkien, *Towers* 471). Even the language between Treebeard and Quickbeam is markedly different. While Treebeard’s dialogue is riddled with slow rumblings and “hms” and “hooms,” suggesting deep, almost sleepy speech, Quickbeam’s is largely without pause and instead, more akin to the pace and cadence of the Hobbit’s own speech, harkening to a compelling difference in the use of language to distinguish vegetal bodies from one another. Ultimately, Tolkien’s depiction of trees, or tree-like bodies, is one that privileges variety over uniformity. His desire to recognize the trees as unique entities, varying greatly from one another even in something as seemingly uniform as a forest, demonstrates a profound desire to privilege identity among nonhuman beings.

To return to the deconstruction of the nature/culture binary, we recognize that the demarcated line between the wild realm of the “Forest” and the cultural realm of our Hobbits is far from clear or distinct. The line itself is permeable, organic, and in need of tending, even

enforcement, to keep it from becoming unmanageable or unrecognizable as the trees try and fail to re-absorb it. We may also recognize that on either side of this porous line, neither group is wholly separate from the other. The Bucklanders appear fearful of the forest, and yet are queer entities themselves, particularly because of their unique desire to remain physically close to the natural realm. They are regarded as “peculiar, half foreigners” by the inner Hobbit society at Hobbiton (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 96). They are also, like the forest, suspicious, untrusting, and watchful. Additionally, the forest is not wholly uniform, but contains the multitudinous elements so often reserved for sentient creatures. Patrick Curry reminds us that “every forest in Middle-earth - Mirkwood, the Old Forest, Fangorn, even Woody End in the Shire - has its own unique personality” (Curry 51), and furthermore, that it “wouldn’t be stretching a point to say that Middle-earth itself appears as a character in its own right. And the living personality and agency of this character are none the less for being nonhuman” (Curry 50). The trees and tree-like bodies of Tolkien’s *Rings* take on many different forms, maintain distinct personalities, and even produce complex language.

3. On Vibrant Matter and Trans-Corporeality

The porous and precarious binary between the cultural and the natural worlds leads us to yet another ecocritical concept discussed at length in Iovino and Oppermann’s *Material Ecocriticism*. This collection helps us to unpack the notion of nonhuman agency, or what ecocritics like Bennet and Alaimo term “vibrant matter” and “trans-corporeality,” respectively. As previously discussed, trans-corporeality explores the ways in which human and nonhuman bodies are consistently intertwined and never truly external to one another. Furthermore, forms of matter, including vegetal bodies, are capable of expressing forms of agency, and by extension, forms of communication, as they continually merge and blend with humanoid beings. To better

explore the applicability of the trans-corporeal, we might turn more closely to Tolkien's humanoid creatures.

Many of these beings successfully encapsulate the notion of the trans-corporeal in the way they allow themselves to be permeated by and become, by extension, at one with the natural world. The relationship between Hobbits and nature, for example, is emblematic of this trans-corporeal process. Hobbits occupy a kind of stewardship role, or what Matthew Dickerson defines as the "responsibility one has for those things that have been placed under one's care" (Dickerson 131). We might even link Hobbit stewardship to Adam's "dominion" over all living things in the Garden of Eden (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Gen. 1:26). In the Biblical model, God rests at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Man, and then animal and plant. However, despite the potential for a hierarchical reading of Hobbit stewardship, Dickerson and Evans challenge this idea, proposing that we understand this system of caretaking as "servanthood stewardship" (Qtd. In Jeffers 37). In turn, they draw upon Steven Bouma-Prediger's reading of the term "respect"; "*Respect* names an understanding of and proper regard for the integrity and well-being of other creatures. A respectful person shows both esteem and deference to the other, because of the unique nature of that other" (Bouma-Prediger, qtd. in Dickerson, Evans, qtd. in Jeffers 37-8). This definition applies distinctly to the relationship that many of the human and humanoid figures in *Rings* have with the natural world, not least of all our Hobbits, whose stewardship is not one of top-down domination or even one that seeks to enforce a distinct binary; rather, it is a form of stewardship that sees itself as existing on the same moral and natural plane of existence as Middle Earth itself.

To continue with our Hobbit example, Jeffers reminds us in her chapter "Community, or 'Power With'" that Hobbits, while not as distinctly or as openly as Ents or Elves, are "viscerally

connected to their place” in the environment as they do not wear shoes and therefore, our “nation of gardeners are is depicted as connected to the Earth in so basic a fashion” (Jeffers 33). Hobbits live in burrows underground and are quite literally surrounded by soil and vegetation. Bilbo lives in “a hole in the ground” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 1) after all, and Tolkien finds this detail important enough to make it the very first description readers ever get about Hobbits. Additionally, Hobbits are creatures of consumption and take great pleasure in the eating of growing things. In fact, the consumption of living things appears to move beyond the mere pleasure of eating. As Jeffers notes, Hobbits’ consumption “is about a joy in the thing itself, from start to finish of the thing’s development. Their consumption is not about the mere satisfaction of individual impulses. There is a process to the gratification of their appetites...[t]hey love to plant, to tend, to harvest, and to eat, and to plant again” (Jeffers 36). The Hobbits’ interest in consuming their natural world moves beyond the pleasures of eating. It is instead an immanent impulse. In order for Hobbits to feel good and whole, they must take in the elements of their environment and, in turn, their environment depends upon their cultivation and stewardship to truly flourish. The act of growing, harvesting, and eating is a process of sacred importance.

As a way of understanding the full extent of their trans-corporeal relation to nature, we should consider what happens when this connection is broken. After Tom Bombadil rescues the Hobbits from the Barrow-wights, creatures that, like the Nazgul, are largely devoid of physical bodies and thus have little relationship with the physical, natural world, he encourages the Hobbits to heal the estrangement the creatures have caused by letting “the warm sunlight heat now heart and limb!” and to “[c]ast off these cold rags! Run naked on the grass” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 140). The advice appears strange and yet, when considered within the light of the trans-corporeal, makes perfect sense. The vegetal world requires light in order to live. Bombadil

is perhaps one of Tolkien's strangest and yet, most intrinsically connected to the natural world. He recognizes the innate need of the Hobbits to consume sunlight as one of the most basic building blocks of the natural world. In a kind of photosynthetic exercise mirroring that of vegetal bodies, the Hobbits must feel the land beneath their feet and the sunlight on their skin to feel whole and replenished again given their recent proximity to death and sterility at the hands of the Barrow-wights.

Similarly, we are reminded that when Frodo and Sam trek across the desert land surrounding Orodruin, Frodo loses his grasp on reality and his past as he feels more disconnected from the natural world. In response to Sam's question about the taste of food and the feeling of warmth in the garden region of Ithilien, Frodo "cannot see them." He goes on to lament, "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark" (Tolkien, *Return* 916). The end of Frodo's description is again, reminiscent of the Barrow-wight episode, in which Frodo awakes to find himself "flat on his back upon a cold stone with his hands on his breast...his fear was so great that it seemed to be part of the very darkness that was round him" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 137). In the absence of light, vegetation, water, air, and other indicators of the natural world, Frodo feels "naked in the dark," and this harkens to the moment in which he finds himself in a state resembling death, locked in the darkness and cold of a literal tomb.

We might also consider this same Barrow-wight episode as illustrative of an important bodily contrast in the novel. The Barrow-wights' disconnection from vegetation and light is sharply disparate from the Hobbits' embodiment of nature and, by extension, their need for connection with the natural world. The Barrow-wights are rarely described in full and instead, are mostly represented in disembodied elements. There is a "long arm...walking on its fingers"

and a “crawling arm” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 137) near Frodo’s cold body, suggesting an unnatural disunion among the body itself. Furthermore, the Barrow-wights’ disembodiment is encapsulated in their eerie language, which is “cold,” “heartless,” and “far away” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 137), indicating that their language carries with it a feeling of distance and disconnection, untouched by the process of trans-corporeality.

Ultimately, we call attention to the Hobbits’ physical embodiment of nature not to say that Frodo, or any other Hobbit for that matter, is a metaphor for nature or any vegetal body. This would be a largely reductive and over-simplified reading as it ignores the unique identities of both Hobbit and plant alike. Instead, it is better to consider the notion of the trans-corporeal in relation to the Hobbits and to other humanoid creatures in *Rings* given their connection to their environment. Just as the Hobbits consume the substance of their natural world in order to feel whole, they also come to embody the processes associated with the matter they consume. This reciprocal process becomes more apparent as we continue to explore Tolkien's depictions of trees as containing elements recognizable to human beings - they talk (albeit in their own languages), they think, they move, and they feel. As Iovino and Oppermann remind us in their introduction, human and nonhuman systems are reliant upon and informed by one another insomuch that they become a part of the same system:

[H]umans, nonhumans, and their stories are tied together. The emerging dynamics of matter and meaning, body and identity, being and knowing, nature and culture, *bios* and society are therefore to be examined and thought not in isolation from each other, but *through* one another, matter being an ongoing process of embodiment that involves and mutually determines cognitions, social constructions, scientific practices, and ethical attitudes...there is no simple

juxtaposition or *mirroring* between nature and culture, but a combined “mesh.”

(Iovino, Oppermann 5)

As we come to think about the nature of vibrant matter in relation to plants and as we continue to think about the nature of other humanoid beings, especially Elves and Ents, we need also reimagine the systems that govern the human and nonhuman. These are not separate systems and certainly do not exist within a hierarchical realm, but are rather a part of the same, governing system and exist, for Tolkien, within the same moral, ethical, and physical plane.

The same trans-corporeal process can be found at work in Elves and Ents, two other important humanoid beings in Middle Earth. Elves and Ents, like Hobbits, are beings who draw power and balance from the natural world itself. They are keenly aware of the presence of nature and incorporate elements of the natural world into their own beings. Furthermore, Hobbits, Elves, and Ents feel morally obligated to respect their environments and establish mutually beneficial relationships with nature. Their relationships with the natural world are ones in which they support their natural environments even as their natural environments support them. Hobbits, Elves, and Ents draw their power from their proximity to nature and nature flourishes in communities governed by these beings. As Jeffers concludes in this section: “All three groups work within boundaries of consumption that replenish and support their environments...They perform their labors within the bounds of a passage of time unique and appropriate to each group. They sustain power with their environments. They live together in community with their world” (Jeffers 48). Jeffers’ assertion about the relationships between these creatures and their environments in *Rings* is one that emphasizes homeostasis and equilibrium in ways most other creatures in Middle Earth do not (or cannot) fully access. However, we might push Jeffers’ assertion even further here. If we think about these creatures - Hobbits, Elves, and Ents - as

existing to varying degrees within the same spectrum as the living, natural world, then we recognize just how porous the subjects are.

While Hobbits, for example, require the consumption of their natural world, including even sunlight and physical contact with the grass on their bare skin for nourishment, Elves take us a step further. They are humanoid beings intrinsically entwined with the natural world who are mentally and spiritually nourished by their contact with the environment. We cannot forget that Elves do not live to die as Man does, but are instead forever young and a part of Middle Earth. There is no afterlife for Elves; they have only the physical land to remain anchored in, whether it be the lands of Middle Earth or the Undying Lands of Aman. Elves are as embedded in the landscape of Middle Earth as are the trees and the mountains themselves. In fact, Elves do not even “sleep” in the same sense that Man does, but are instead renewed by contact with the physical world: “[Legolas] could sleep, if sleep it could be called by Men, resting his mind in the strange paths of elvish dreams, even as he walked open-eyed in the light of this world” (Tolkien, *Towers* 418-9). Legolas is renewed in “strange...elvish dreams” that occur in the “light of this world,” suggesting the close, physical contact with the natural environment, including sunlight. The Elves do not enter full unconsciousness or anything resembling death, as they find renewal in consistent contact with physical place.

Additionally, it is the proclivity of the Elves to find their home in the forest, living in the natural world, particularly in the trees. Upon entering Lothlorien in *Fellowship*, for example, Legolas is jovial, even intoxicated by his contact with the forest. He comments on the sound of falling water, which, he exclaims, “may bring us sleep and forgetfulness of grief” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 330). Again, we see the prospect of finding both emotional and physical restoration by contact with nature. We are reminded that his very name “Legolas” is Sindarin for

“Greenleaf,” and he is “clad in green and brown” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 234) like the other Elves of Mirkwood who wear these earthen tones as reflection of their intimate connection to, and reverence for, the natural world.

Later, Legolas explains to the company, “I am at home among trees, by root or bough, though these trees are a kind strange to me, save as a name in song...I have never climbed in one. I will see now what is their shape and way of growth” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 333). Legolas’ interest, as an Elf, is purely in knowing the tree, in exploring its composition and, most importantly, its style of growth. He must contact and enter the realm of nature by physical connection with the tree. Later in the same episode, the intrinsic and meshed relationship between Elf and tree appears to rub off on Frodo, who feels compelled to “la[y] his hand upon the tree beside the ladder.” Our narrator explains, “never before had [Frodo] been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 342). The feeling of connection for the sake of connection with a living body, and then being acted on by said living body in return, forms the basis for the concept of vibrant matter and “intra-action,” the latter a term coined by feminist theorist Karen Barad. Glotfelty summarizes the two concepts in her article:

Barad’s ‘intra-action’ concisely replaces the old idea that objects, observers, and observations are discrete and separate entities with the new idea that these phenomena are always entangled, mutually constitutive, and coevolving. Matter, humans, and mind are some elements of the fabric of the universe... ‘vibrant matter’ similarly replaces the old idea that matter can be acted on but is not itself an actor with the new idea that matter has agency. (Glotfelty 222-3)

These ecocritical concepts help us to better tap into what Tolkien is doing throughout the novel, as he demonstrates an acute awareness of the ways in which living things, both human and nonhuman, exist on a shared and “entangled” plane of existence. The trans-corporeal body is the body of the beings of Middle Earth as the trees and humanoid creatures come to acknowledge a shared being and equally important presence in nature. They are bodies of vibrant matter that draw from, and act upon, one another.

We pivot now to a final group of sentient beings in *Rings*, for they even more clearly demonstrate the concepts of the trans-corporeal and vibrant matter of Tolkien’s Middle Earth, especially in their appearance and in their language. Such is evident in a few key moments in the text containing the Ents, particularly Treebeard, before we turn more broadly to Tolkien’s trees. Treebeard and the Ents are the pinnacle of trans-corporeality and vibrant matter literalized. The physical bodies of the Ents stand to remind the reader of the physical reciprocity between sentient beings and the natural realm. As Jeffers points out, Ents “not only harness the power of the natural, organic world, but they also embody that power. Their physicality highlights the connectedness of a material reality with a power beyond the self” (Jeffers 27). Dickerson and Evans explain that Ents are “treelike beings endowed with the ability to speak on behalf of the trees,” following their creation by Yavanna⁶ as protectors of all vegetal beings, and they lead the trees like shepherds for a flock and, when necessary defend said flock (Dickerson, Evans 123). They go on to explain that the “value of the forests that the Ents represent, embody, and defend is made evident by Tolkien’s inclusion of such figures in the narrative...Ents provide the reader

⁶ Yavanna creates the Ents shortly after Aulë creates the Dwarves. However, the thought of Dwarves, Man, and all other sentient creatures’ apparent dominion over the *olvar*, Quenyan for “growing things with roots in the earth,” distresses Yavanna who “hold[s] trees dear” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 45). It is interesting that following Yavanna’s plea to create the Ents as protectors of the trees, Manwë deems it “a strange thought” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 45), suggesting that even for the rest of the Valar, thinking about vegetal bodies as agentic and as protectors of the seemingly “inert” vegetal body is “strange.” However, as Yavanna reminds him, the creation of Ents was ““in the Song,”” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 45), and thus intended by Ilúvatar.

with a perspective that highlights the value of unordered nature” (Dickerson, Evans 123).

Importantly, Ents straddle two important realms of existence in the novel. They are not trees and yet, they embody the tree-ish characteristics that blur the anatomical and aesthetic boundaries between Man and tree.

During Merry and Pippin’s first interaction with Treebeard, the narrator describes “a most extraordinary face” belonging to “a large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck.” The narrator goes on to loosely describe the body of Treebeard, which is hard to define within the bounds of tree or Man; “[w]hether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say” (Tolkien, *Towers* 452). The appendages and features too, are quickly recognizable as arms, toes, skin, and facial hair; however, they are equally strange and seem to border on the liminal state between tree and human: “At any rate, the arms...were not wrinkled, but covered with a brown smooth skin. The large feet had seven toes each. The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends” (Tolkien, *Towers* 452). It is important to note that the narrator works to make sense of Treebeard’s physical body, first within the realm of human characteristics. Treebeard has arms and toes, albeit seven of each. He has smooth-brown skin and a “sweeping” beard. However, the physical descriptions are contrasted with reminders of his nonhuman characteristics calling attention back to his tree-like form. Whether he is clad in attire, or whether the “stuff” is a part of his “bark” is difficult to discern. The beard, which is at first described as such closer to Treebeard’s face, appears to become “almost twiggy” and more like “moss” near its end.

The narrator, who in this scene appears to be a focalization of Merry and Pippin’s gaze, does not seem to know what to make of Treebeard who is, by all accounts, a blend of the human

and the nonhuman, both “Man-like” and yet decidedly resembling the element he is most closely in contact with: trees. We are also reminded that on the conceptual level, the name “Treebeard” is an encapsulation of his physical self. He is both like tree and Man, the terms “tree” and “beard” signifying both elements of his being and merging the two as a title he adopts from the Common Speech. Even more telling, “Fangorn” is not only the name of the forest in which Treebeard dwells, but also his name, as “Fangorn” is Sindarin for “Treebeard.”⁷ Thus, Treebeard and Fangorn are intertwined in the trans-corporeal not only on the physical level, but also on the linguistic. The other named Ents in the novel like Lindenroot, Birchseed, and of course, Quickbeam, further the connection between physical appearance, state of being, and naming. This kind of double-connection helps point to a larger trend in the novel, in which trans-corporeal blending of the human and nonhuman can occur through both physical meshing and through labeling and language itself.

If we harken back to our previous conversations regarding the porous nature of the trans-corporeal body, then we have a lens with which to view the body of Treebeard and the rest of the Ents. Treebeard is a literal depiction of the body that is at once human and nonhuman. He is the pinnacle of the transient body, not occupying either human or nonhuman camp in any respect but instead, a perfect combination of symbiotic meshing. A creature of both human quality, sentience, and being, but also of wood, nature, and Earth. As Simon C. Estok explains, there is no true boundary between our bodies and the forces and materials of our environment. Instead the body is “the expressive site upon which material agencies flow and are reworked (not as a passive element but as a coplayer.” He goes on to explain that “[o]ur bodies are, in other words, the narrative agents that reveal both our exposure to and our participation in this complex of

⁷ The literal translation is “beardtree” in the Sindarin, as “fanga” translates to “beard and “orne” translates to “tree.” See “Elements in Quenya and Sindarin Names” in the Appendix of *Silmarillion*.

relationships” (Estok 130). Treebeard’s trans-corporeal body is one that outwardly displays an obvious depth and complicated, historical narrative with roots deep in the natural world.

Treebeard’s connection with the environment extends beyond the obvious physical similarities between himself and trees. We perceive a sense of his personal narrative steeped in a rich and ancient history through the description that Pippin provides retrospectively when trying to describe Treebeard’s eyes:

One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present: like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don't know but it felt as if something that grew in the ground-asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between roof-tip and leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years. (Tolkien, *Towers* 452)

Pippin’s use of metaphor in the above description is particularly important. Treebeard’s eyes suggest a wealth of knowledge and history as old as the world itself, filled with “ages of memory” and as deep as a well, yet they are still “sparkling with the present.” Treebeard’s presence is both founded in an ageless past and firmly connected in the present day. This suggests a profound connection with the Earth itself, which, of course, is ancient. Pippin’s description goes on to recognize the action of “growth” as Treebeard’s awakening and studying the Hobbits is compared to the emerging of the growing process of plants. The “something that grew” becomes metonymic of the natural world itself, which stares down at Pippin, acknowledging his existence while Pippin stares back at the literal merging of the human and

nonhuman world. Over the long and ancient years, Treebeard's physical body has absorbed the natural world, which rests, like a narrative, upon his body and within his eyes.

In the next section, Treebeard acknowledges this merging and meshing process among the Ents, trees, and other forms of human and nonhuman life in Middle Earth. He explains that Ents are "tree-herders" and that over time as the Ents have come to dwindle in numbers, "[s]heep get like shepherds, and shepherds like sheep...but slowly, and neither have long in the world." He goes on to clarify that the process is "quicker and closer with trees and Ents, as they walk down the ages together" (Tolkien, *Towers* 457). He recognizes the physical blending that Ents are apt to undergo when surrounded by trees, but he also acknowledges that trees can become Entish and resemble the features of humanoid beings as well; "Some of my kin look just like trees now, and need something great to rouse them; and they speak only in whispers. But some of my trees are limb-lithe, and many can talk to me" (Tolkien, *Towers* 457). Treebeard not only associates with trees, but also acknowledges his role in a larger spectrum containing Men and Elves. He explains: "Ents are more like Elves: less interested in themselves than Men are, and better at getting inside other things. And yet again Ents are more like Men, more changeable than Elves are, and quicker at taking the colour of the outside" (Tolkien, *Towers* 457). The curious inability of Treebeard to completely discern where (or what) he is most like continues to suggest his trans-corporeal nature. He has, in essence, become like all others who, in turn, he recognizes share elements in common with himself. The Ents fully acknowledge their connection and their porous nature, taking in, or getting into, the matter of the beings that surround them, even through their very names. They are, as Treebeard suggests, not trees themselves, but tree-ish, not Man, but like Man, not Elves but like Elves. Ents are the trans-corporeal figure in its most actualized form.

4. On the Language and Agency of Trees

As we have now explored the process of the trans-corporeal in *Rings*, it is necessary at this section of the essay to shift more fully to matters of vegetal agency, matter, and especially language, a final point which we have continually alluded to in our discussion of the trans-corporeal. Given the agency that Tolkien assigns to non-humanoid beings in the text, particularly trees, we find a natural environment that has been assigned the ability to think, to move, and to speak. The “vibrant matter” of Tolkien is one of perhaps the most striking and enduring features of his beloved works, yet only recently has ecocriticism given us the language with which to understand the gravity of his achievements. Again, as Curry notes, it often feels as though Middle Earth is “a character in its own right” (Curry 50). The evidence suggests that Tolkien’s conception of vegetal bodies and the vibrant matter of his text are creatures with identity who contribute as much as they take in. These beings serve not as backdrop for the action of the story but as movers and actors.

Tolkien’s interest in trees is not so much in representing them as stagnant or fixed objects of aesthetic beauty. Tolkien’s Ents provide just the start of a much greater and more nuanced reading of the agency Tolkien assigns to vegetal and non-humanoid creatures. Tolkien’s trees are not to be acted upon; they are creatures of action. Tolkien saw trees as characters in their own right, interacting and sharing with his humanoid creatures while, conversely, maintaining a unique culture, personality, and language of their own. In a frequently quoted passage from a letter to W. H. Auden in June of 1955, Tolkien reflects on the creation of the Ents and asserts that their construction was in some way “unconscious” and reflective of feelings he long harbored about “philology, literature and life.” Tolkien explains, “[the Ents’ presence] in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby

use made in Shakespeare of the coming of ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill’: I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war” (Tolkien, *Letters* 163). Tolkien’s desire to attribute agency to vegetal bodies is well-documented in many other letters as well. He recounts that following the Fall of Man, all beings can succumb to temptation, even outright corruption, and trees are not exempt from what we might otherwise only attribute as possibility for humanoid creatures: “The Fall or corruption, therefore, of all things in it and all inhabitants of it, was a possibility if not inevitable. Trees may ‘go bad’ as in the Old Forest” (Tolkien, *Letters* 212). Additionally, in a 1972 op-ed published in the *Daily Telegraph*, Tolkien provides the following description of the way his forests enact consciousness and respond to external stimuli in their environments:

Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. (Tolkien, *Letters* 339)

The “machine-loving enemy” most notable and in greatest contention with the trees of Fangorn is, of course, Saruman, whose destruction of the forest for the sake of industrializing Isengard is met with a terrible wrath he does not expect from the forest. The Ents and, to an equally important degree, the Hurons, hybridized creatures somewhere between Ent and tree but who can still “move very quickly” when angry and who “still have voices” and “can speak with the Ents” (Tolkien, *Towers* 551), bring with them the fury of the natural world. As the Ents and Hurons move on Isengard, breaking its walls and ultimately flooding the area, the scene

illustrates a particularly pointed re-emergence of the trans-corporeal, made possible by the agency of our vegetal bodies. They move into the now-sterile realm of Isengard like a great “howling gale” (Tolkien, *Towers* 554), leaving a trail of crumbled rock and debris in their wake, becoming what is effectively a sentient natural disaster. As the Ents rage on, the Hurons form “a wood...all round Isengard” (Tolkien, *Towers* 553), encapsulating an act of re-forestation, but drastically sped up. The retribution of the Ents and Hurons is as swift as it is alarming due its power to alter the landscape. An “Ent-fist crumples iron like thin tin” (Tolkien, *Towers* 553), while “in five minutes [the Ents] had [the] huge gates...lying in ruin” (Tolkien, *Towers* 553). Nature’s re-entering a land made devoid of plant life by the destruction of human (or the humanoid), is best captured in Merry’s observation. He describes how the fingers and toes of the Ents appear to “freeze on the rock” and “tear it up like bread-crust,” which is “like watching the work of great tree-roots in a hundred years, all packed into a few moments” (Tolkien, *Towers* 553). Though obviously made manifest in the literal walking and talking of the Ents and Hurons, this description provides us with a way to think about this scene in the light of both trans-corporeality and plant agency. The cultural, even industrialized world (to a more extreme degree) cannot be kept separate from the natural, the vegetal; over time, the vegetal can re-immense itself in the land and reform its trans-corporeal connection in the same way that Isengard slowly fills with the “creeping streams and pools” (Tolkien, *Towers* 557) of flood waters and the encroaching trees of Fangorn.

What is perhaps most important to note in Tolkien’s language is the agency he assigns to the forests. Fangorn Forest is angry due to the destruction done unto it and as a result, it decides to act. Meanwhile, Lothlórien, as we see earlier in *Fellowship*, is capable of not only receiving, but acknowledging love and as a result, it flourishes. The Old Forest is hostile because it has

memory, one of perhaps the most important hallmarks of consciousness and agency. Legolas, receptive to the emotion of the forest and the natural world as an Elf, recounts of Fangorn, “It is old and full of memory. I could have been happy here, if I had come in days of peace” (Tolkien, *Towers* 480). Again, Fangorn is hostile because it openly perceives a physical threat to its safety and responds in such a way as to protect itself. Perhaps most importantly, Tolkien goes so far as to assert that the forests “awake” and find “consciousness of themselves,” not consciousness that is assigned, taught, or projected unto them. As Peter Wohlleben suggests in *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, recent scientific research has allowed us to reconsider how trees act, communicate, store memory, and “think.” He also suggests that we now “know that trees can learn. This means they must store experiences somewhere, and therefore, there must be some kind of a storage mechanism inside the organism” (Wohlleben 82). We might also remember that Treebeard, although not strictly a “tree,” but formed within the same image and containing elements of “tree,” is “filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking.” Tolkien’s conception of plant-based learning, thinking, and memory was more accurate than we could have ever come to recognize without the recent advances in botanical science.

To return briefly to the Old Forest section in the first half of *Fellowship*, we can consider Old Man Willow as one of the clearest representations of Tolkien’s porous, trans-corporeal body and a figure of vibrant matter. While we might read Old Man Willow as an angry being of agentic capability who seeks revenge on the Hobbits, we need also think of him as representative of the intermingling of physical bodies, a blending of the natural realm and the humanoid. The Hobbits become one with Old Man Willow after they are, quite literally, taken in. Merry and Pippin find themselves in a grotesque figure of entanglement with the body of the tree as “[t]he

crack by which [Pippin] had laid himself had closed together, so that not a chink could be seen. Merry was trapped: another crack had closed around his waist; his legs lay outside, but the rest of him was inside a dark opening, the edges of which gripped like a pair of pincers” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 115). The Hobbits’ physical bodies become enmeshed through a series of “cracks,” which effectively serve as pores between the outside world and the body of Old Man Willow. The description also provides a reading of Old Man Willow that suggests agency. The cracks “close” over Pippin, and the edges of the crack that consumes Merry “gripped like a pair of pincers.”

What is even more indicative of increased trans-corporeal union and vibrancy is that, after being consumed by Old Man Willow, the Hobbits can understand his language. When Sam starts a fire around the base of the trunk of the tree, Merry calls out, “Put it out! Put it out!...’He’ll squeeze me in two, if you don’t. He says so!” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 116). While on the outside of the tree, Sam interprets only “cracks” and leaves that “seemed to hiss above their heads with a sound of pain and anger” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 116), upon being absorbed by the body of Old Man Willow, the Hobbits can then interpret messages from the tree only transmuted through some complex form of language. He will break Merry in two not because Merry feels physically threatened by the entrapment of Old Man Willow and assumes Old Man Willow’s intention, but specifically because the tree “says so.” Returning to Jeffers’ conception of “power with” relationships between the natural world and humanoid bodies in the novel, just as some of the figures in the novel appear to draw power from physical contact with the natural world, Old Man Willow demonstrates that the relationship can work the other way. He preys on the Hobbits, absorbing them, consuming them as a sign of vengeance, protection, and control. The literal consumption of the Hobbits suggests Tolkien’s keen recognition of trans-corporeal relationships

between bodies. In this case, the bodies of our Hobbits are consumed by a figure who perceives them as a threat and associates their presence with danger, no doubt connected in Old Man Willow's memory with the burning of the Old Forest by the Hobbits of Buckland many years ago. Old Man Willow is a figure of agentic being, a culmination of vibrant matter in its most actualized form. He is a porous body, capable of absorption, union, and even communication when fully connected with the bodies of others.

Given Tolkien's profound representation of non-humanoid forms capable of language expression, we might consider how the ability to produce language often appears the penultimate indication of agency and the greatest culmination of vibrant matter at work. We will look to a collection of recent scholarship in ecological studies in plant communication to outline some of these forms and expand our understanding of the way we might think about language regarding vegetal bodies. While delving into the minutia of the science underpinning these forms would extend beyond the scope of this essay, we can use some of its concepts to think about how Tolkien draws our attention to plant communication in the sections of his novel dedicated to trees, Ents, and other artifacts of nature. We might then also consider how these modes of expression and understanding transcend traditional human language forms founded on the sign and the signified by looking at Entish, which seeks to know the subject through a subject's narrative history instead of through representation with a constructed signifier.

Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira explore a wide range of language capabilities outside of the human realm in their collection *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. The primary assertion of this book is that plants are complex organisms capable of information-processing and communication with each other and their environment in ways humans have only just begun taking seriously. Crucially, many of the essays in the book consider links from across

a wide range of academic disciplines, bridging forms of representation and communication in plants from the humanities and philosophy to neurobiology, ecocriticism, and other areas of the posthumanities. As Vieira notes in her essay “Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing,” authors have long been interested in representing language forms in communication between plants, as they “have been at the forefront of attempts to translate plant stories into language humans would understand.” She goes on to assert that “[f]rom the talking trees in J.R.R Tolkien’s fiction and plant narrators in more recent novels, to installations that capture human-plant interactions, we have long endeavored to learn what vegetal beings convey” (Vieira 215). Vieira’s claim points to a larger question not only about plant communication, but also about the representation of plant communication in novels, stories, film, etc. as we humans attempt to form a symbolic understanding of how plants might truly communicate with each other and with the outside world.

While human access to nonhuman forms of communication and representation is something open to debate in recent ecological and materialist criticism⁸, it is important to consider what representations of plant communication in Tolkien’s *Rings* can tell us about Tolkien’s conception of vegetal agency. Erin James concedes in her article “What the Plant Says: Plant Narrators and the Ecosocial Imaginary” that it is unlikely that “such narratives can tell us what it *really* is like to experience the world from a plant’s perspective” but perhaps “tracking and categorizing the various narrative strategies employed” might “help readers better recognize

⁸ Kohn seeks to reconcile and understand the relationship “between distinctively human forms of representation and these other forms [in order to] practice an anthropology that does not radically separate humans from nonhumans” (Kohn 9) in his book *How Forests Think*. He explores some concepts from American linguist Charles S. Peirce by presenting the icon, or the “sonic image” and the “index” as unique forms of sign-making that stand distinctly apart from human language and could be accessible to humans, animals, and plants alike. Likewise, Wohlleben points to scientific research suggesting that plants use scent through chemical compounds to communicate danger to other trees in the vicinity. Other, more recent research suggests communication through sound waves and visual formations as well.

how they imagine the plants that surround them” (James 256). We might also consider how Tolkien helps us to understand nonhuman life’s capacity for advanced and complicated forms of expression distinct from human forms, and perhaps if through the process of trans-corporeality, there is any way to bridge the disconnect in forms of expression. As Treebeard reminds us regarding the possibilities of communication between trees and humanoid forms, Elves began the process of “teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk” (Tolkien, *Towers* 457). The communication process then, is mutable, reciprocal, and fluid as the Elves do not only do the teaching but learn the “tree-talk” as its own, unique language form.

While plant communication underpins a great deal of the action of *Rings*, particularly in *Towers*, we can limit our focus by returning to the most important episode regarding the language and agency of plants: Treebeard’s encounter with Merry and Pippin in Fangorn. This is perhaps Tolkien’s greatest undertaking regarding plant communication with plant-based language forms. Upon meeting Treebeard, one of the most striking points of interest is his reliance on action and experience to form names of things. Treebeard consults a “list” of living beings recited in the form of a poem in order to place the Hobbits, a race of folk he has never encountered before:

Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!

First name the four, the free peoples:

Eldest of all, the elf-children;

Dwarf the delver; dark are his houses;

Ent the earthborn, old as mountains;

Man the mortal, master of horses...

Beaver the builder, buck the leaper,

Bear bee-hunter, boar the fighter,

Hound is hungry, hare is fearful... (Tolkien, *Towers* 453)

Already, we see what feels like an alternative to humanoid language: Treebeard (and we might assume this is true of other Ents as well) thinks of living things in regard to what it is they do. He categorizes and draws meaning from an intimacy with the action that defines a being. Knowing what the creature is called is not enough to craft meaning or understanding around said being. A description of action is required to really name a thing.

However, action is only one step in the Entish naming process. What is even more important is a thing's history and experience. After Merry and Pippin present their names to Treebeard, something he finds to be particularly important in understanding what they are, he is hesitant to present his own: "I am not going to tell you *my* name, not yet at any rate...[f]or one thing it would take a long while: my name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so *my* name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the thing they belong to in my language" (Tolkien, *Towers* 454). The name of a thing, in Treebeard's conception, is not truly meant to be symbolic, but rather a direct manifestation of the thing itself through story. Names are not static, but always growing as the subject continues to live and experience. We see the same naming pattern later as Treebeard struggles to reconcile the terse nature of the word "hill" with its signified following Pippin's reminder: "Treebeard repeated the words thoughtfully. "*Hill*. Yes, that was it. But it is a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped" (Tolkien, *Towers* 455). Treebeard's understanding of a subject is, again, intrinsically linked to his understanding of that thing's past through story, memory, and the senses. He explains earlier in the same passage that he struggles to think of the word for "hill" and instead, uses his own experience and observation to make sense of it: "I can

see and hear (and smell and feel) a great deal from this, from this, from this *a-lalla-lalla-rumba-kamanda-lind-or-burúmë*. Excuse me: that is a part of my name for it; I do not know what the word is in the outside languages” (Tolkien, *Towers* 454). His attempts to remember the name is specifically linked to his interaction with the natural world around him in relation to the hill: “the thing we are on, where I stand and look out on fine mornings, and think about the Sun, and the grass beyond the wood, and the horses, and the clouds, and the unfolding of the world” (Tolkien, *Towers* 454).

Treebeard is directly connected to the world around him, which is to say, the natural world of plants (Fangorn Forest is mostly devoid of not only humanoid life, but animal life as well), and this connection is reflected in his use of language, which seeks to capture the essence of the subject. In one respect, Treebeard is representative of the concept of language before the Fall. As Dickerson and Evans claim, Treebeard “fulfills the concept of the ‘fitness’ between words and the things they name” (Dickerson, Evans 128). For Treebeard, the importance of a thing is equatable to the true name of a thing, since the two are, for him, effectively one and the same. There is no distance between a thing’s name and the thing itself.⁹ If Treebeard is a representative, a kind of emissary of the natural world who is also physically endowed with the power and form of trees (an “*inarboration*”), then his connection to language must also be something innate to the natural world itself. Language is, quite clearly in Tolkien’s conception, an essential quality of nature as much as it is a quality of Man.

⁹ Dickerson and Evans conclude with a reminder about Tolkien’s own love of language, which suggests Treebeard as voice of the natural world and Tolkien the philologist; “Treebeard speaks on behalf of the trees and forests of Middle-earth, indicating the value of wilderness. More particularly, the Ents serve both as an incarnation - or *inarboration* - of the vegetative life of that world” (Dickerson, Evans 129). Understanding this connection might help us to better consider the ecological link between language and the natural world.

We can take this connection between language and nature a step further in thinking about how Tolkien's representation of said connection in his novel plays out in the ecological study of plant communication. Treebeard famously recounts, while describing the destruction of Saruman, that the trees "had voices of their own" (Tolkien, *Towers* 463). This is, perhaps, not so far from the truth. In understanding the agency of vegetal bodies, we might consider the process of language creation in *Rings* as indicative of the natural process that plants use for communication. If we are to think about the process of language as Richard Karban does in his essay "The Language of Plant Communication (and How It Compares to Animal Communication)," then we find that "the cues used by plants exhibit many of the characteristics that linguists require of language" (Kurban 3). Plants can respond to the signs described by Kohn through indexing, for example, which is to say that plants respond to action as a sign for further consequence. Wohlleben gives the example of a caterpillar nibbling on the leaf of a tree. The tree registers "pain" like a human might and sends out electrical signals signaling for the tree to begin producing defensive chemical compounds to deter the invader. Unlike human beings who process pain nearly immediately, "the plant signal travels at the slow speed of a third of an inch per minute" (Wohlleben 8), a speed not wholly unlike the speed Tolkien seeks to capture in Treebeard, who reminds us that "it takes a very long time to say anything in [Entish], because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to" (Tolkien, *Towers* 454). Thinking about this as a kind of language, in which action is processed and interpreted as a sign, requires human beings to reconsider the nature of language formation. Treebeard hints at this disconnect in explaining that Entish (perhaps a kind of stand-in, metaphorized plant language) is "lovely" but near impossible for the Hobbits, or most any other humanoid creatures, to understand.

To reiterate, the problem with understanding plant “language” is truly “our understanding of the precise lexicon of plant communication” (Karban 3), which is markedly different from that of humans and even animals. To return again to Erin James, who reminds us that all matter is a “‘site of narrativity’ and thus can be the object of critical analysis aimed at discovering its own stories” (James 255), we need think about Treebeard, who despite having learned the languages of Man and Elves, places most power in the Entish language, which he shares exclusively with the natural world around him. It is slow yet anchored in “narrativity” and the ability to tell its story as a way to also communicate being. Treebeard’s language, like the language of plants themselves it would seem, is not a symbolic language in which signs dominate subject through representation, but rather, a language that presents subject through telling its story. It is not language that seeks to dominate an object but rather, an ideal language that seeks to capture the essence of the thing it seeks to know.

5. Conclusion

To close this essay, we might consider what reading Tolkien’s novel, most notably his figures closely connected to and entangled with the natural world, tell us about the role of humanity in our natural world. Considering the concepts of the trans-corporeal, the porous, vibrant bodies, and vegetal forms capable of intrinsic language and communication, we are reminded of the privileging we so often assume for ourselves as human beings. We can recall the words of the late Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who claims that all forms of environmental racism and other kinds of anthropocentrism come from “hegemonic centrism” (Huggan, Tiffin 4-5). Huggan, Tiffin, and Plumwood all help us to recognize the privileging that has, historically, been used to justify the exploitation of environment and nonhuman forms of life. Stemming from the same ideology rooted in colonization and perpetuated by forms of

Eurocentrism to justify the enslavement and exploitation of indigenous peoples and environments all over the world, anthropocentrism effectively underlies this process. In this conception, the natural world is one that is without reason, culture, or perhaps most importantly, access to human forms of language; therefore, it is ours to command, alter, and destroy at will.

These issues regarding speciesism and forms of environmental imperialism harken to the ways in which we think about forms of representation as existing within a hierarchy. Tolkien's *Rings* provides an incredibly valuable framework for thinking about this kind of hegemonic centrism, as trans-corporeality and an inherent equilibrium between human and nonhuman is upheld as inalienable truth in Tolkien's world. While human beings continue to privilege the ability to access human language on our own terms, we cannot forget that this kind of privileging is not unlike the mindset of the colonizer. If we are to continue to measure value by a being's access to human language and forms of human expression, it will continue to perpetuate a system of thought in which human beings always have the upper hand. In order to deconstruct the existing conceptual hierarchy, we must begin to consider, and take seriously, forms of representation that operate outside of our normative language scope, which privileges one group (human beings) over another: nonhuman forms of life. This, of course, requires us to think about modes of representation and communication accessible to nonhuman life forms, which, in so doing, will decenter human beings as the champions of all communicative and representational thought.

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