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Let the Plan(e)t Speak for Itself

Agency, Empathy, and Subjectivity in Sue Burke's *Semiosis*

Abstract

In Sue Burke's 2018 novel Semiosis, a small group of humans leaving a decaying earth to colonize planet Pax discovers that it already has an ecosystem and is inhabited by sentient plants. The narrative unravels over the first century of human presence on it, across seven generations. It is told entirely in the first person by eight different narrators: seven humans and one plant, the rainbow bamboo.

In this essay, I will explore the ramifications of the use of a first-person non-human narrator, commenting on how this allows us to better understand the agency and subjectivity of the character itself within the narrative. Relying mainly on Suzanne Keen's understanding of narrative empathy (2006) and on Rosi Braidotti's "becoming-earth" formulation (2013), I will also argue that the bamboo's perspective situates the reader in a privileged position to consider and discuss these topics, and that the interaction between the human and non-human narrators shows that relinquishing an inherently anthropocentric view of a given planet might lead to a more balanced ecosystem, one that will thrive rather than wither away.

Keywords: *empathy, posthuman, nonhuman characters, science fiction, first-person narrator*

Whether literature might have an impact on our understanding of and interaction with reality has long been a matter of debate. In the past twenty years, researchers have developed a number of different approaches to acquire empirical evidence of the effect of reading fiction on our actions and beliefs. For instance, a much-debated experiment by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castanò (2013, replicated in 2019) has proven that there exists a correlation between reading literary fiction and improved Theory of Mind—that is, the ability of a human being to detect and understand another's emotions. A year before, Zanna Clay and Marco Iacoboni suggested that mirror neurons—"cells with motor properties that fire not only when we perform an action, but also when we observe somebody else performing the same action or an action somewhat related to the action we performed" (2012, 313)—were activated by reading

about an action just as much as by seeing it happen, and drew a link between mirror neurons and our empathic response to others. Again in 2013, P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp correlated improved empathy to reading fiction that prompted emotional “transportation” into the story.

Although all these cognitive studies offer only preliminary findings in support of a strong link between reading fiction and enhanced emotional participation in real life, they are solid ground on which to anchor the claim that literature should be the means through which change is brought about. In this day and age, when humanity at large is continuously confronted with a state of crisis tied to the collapse of our ecosystem, more than one scholar has suggested that literature should be used to inspire action to contrast or, at times, ease in these changes (Donly 2017; Kaplan 2016; Stengers 2015; Scranton 2015; Morton 2013). Corinne Donly, in a 2017 essay on animal narratology, collects some of the most vocal supporters of this school of thought. Citing Timothy Morton, Isabelle Stengers, and Roy Scranton, she writes:

All three of these thinkers suggest that, in the face of doom, humans must learn to inhabit their humanness in new and more selfless ways. Most significantly, however, all link this ‘upgraded’ humanness to the cultivation of new narratives or new narrative habits. Agreeing that humanity—particularly Western capitalistic humanity—has become habituated to behaviors that are disproportionately self-interested and unnecessarily conflictual, I echo the sentiment that *humans need new stories*. I also suggest, however, that we need new templates for constructing our stories. [...] The dominant narrative model holds that story cannot exist in the absence of conflict, yet this perspective seems exceptionally ill-suited to contend with environmental crises—existing and forthcoming—that call for human adaptability. Indeed, considering that evolution occurs in response to shifting environments and that it often depends more on cooperation than on competition (Boyd 2009), it seems prudent to embrace Morton’s advice and learn to create with, rather than against, our environments and our nonhuman compatriots (Morton 2013). This means seeking out those stories that promote a cross-species mutualism, even on the structural level—that is, no longer identifying a story as successful merely because it accompanies a single (human) protagonist as he engages in a conflict. (Donly 2017, 25, emphasis added)

I stand with Donly in suggesting that our historical moment requests a shift in narratives towards stories that embrace a non-anthropocentric perspective, that introduce collaboration, adaptation, and mutual aid to their plots. I also agree, at least to an extent, that we need to move away from conflict both as a rhetorical device and a narrative theme, or at the very least from a perception of conflict as an inherently human feature.

Science fiction authors are in an ideal position to promote such a shift in storytelling. Free from the constraints typical of realist fiction, they can play with characters, settings, and narrative devices to displace the norm and introduce the novelty (what Darko Suvin called “the Novum”

[1979]). For instance, in her 1972 novella *The Word for World Is Forest*, set on a foreign planet, Ursula K. Le Guin characterized the alien species, the Athsheans, as a civilization without wars or conflict and the humans as the element of disruption that introduced mass destruction to the planet, in what she admitted was a thinly veiled pacifist manifesto (Le Guin 2015, “Author’s Introduction”). Other, more recent science fiction works have started displacing the perspective of the readers by introducing non-human narrators. Martha Wells’s *All Systems Red* (2017), for instance, is narrated in the first person by a murderbot, a cyborg programmed to protect a drilling expedition on a faraway planet. Sue Burke’s *Semiosis*, which I will analyze more in detail later, features a bamboo as a first-person narrator.

A set of questions arises from these innovations in fiction. One might wonder, for instance, what this narrative shift implies for the readers, and what effects it has on them. Further, one might ask whether deploying a non-human narrator might foster that shift away from conflict narratives towards stories of collaboration. With regard to *Semiosis*, thus, I enquire: 1) What impact does a plant narrator have on the reader? 2) How does it change the perception of the environment? 3) What happens when the storyworld becomes the *de-facto* narrator? Or, in other words, what happens when it is the (narrative) environment that narrates?

To try to answer all these questions, at least in part, I point to Suzanne Keen’s well-known studies on empathy, Rosi Braidotti’s understanding of relational identity based on the interaction with non-human *zoe* entities, Bernaerts et al.’s study of non-human narrators, and the works on setting by Marco Caracciolo and Erin James.

In the first part, I will focus on the vegetal narrator of *Semiosis*, the rainbow bamboo, while in the second I will explore the relevance of its direct ties to the rest of the planet, concretely serving as the voice of the environment.

1. Let the plant speak for itself

Sue Burke’s *Semiosis*, published in 2018 by HarperCollins and shortlisted for a number of prizes (among which the 2019 Arthur C. Clarke Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel, three of the most important awards for science fiction), follows a small group of humans leaving a decaying earth to colonize an alien planet, which they name Pax. Once landed, they discover that it already has an ecosystem and is inhabited by sentient plants. The narrative unravels over the first century of human presence on Pax, across seven generations of pacifists. It is told entirely in the first person by eight different narrators: seven humans and one plant, the rainbow bamboo.

Humans find traces of the rainbow bamboo in the second chapter, narrated by second-generation Sylvia, but the readers meet it only halfway through Chapter Three, where the narrative switches back and forth between third-generation Higgins and the plant. The bamboo, later named Stevland after the first human to die on the mission and referred to with masculine pronouns (2018, 134), also narrates directly part of the sixth chapter, in combination with seventh-generation Lucille. Humans are wary of sentient plants, but they soon enter into a mutually satisfying relationship with the rainbow bamboo, that claims to be the most intelligent life form on the planet.

As the readers inhabit the bamboo's perspective for the first time, they discover that the plant is not only self-aware—with self-awareness being the element that determines intelligence according to pacifists (2018, 170)—but also cunning. His first thought, upon meeting the humans, is how to domesticate them and how to test *their* intelligence. Realizing that he will need them to continue to thrive—just as he had needed the Glassmakers, another intelligent animal species that used to live symbiotically with him but had later abandoned him, causing his slow withering—he sets up a system of communication, leveraging dualisms to convey simple messages. The bamboo thinks: “Dualism lies at the core of reality. Even simple plants understand: light and dark, dry and wet, up and down, positive and negative. And there are complex ideas like good and evil, being and nonbeing, life and death. I will present this to the foreigners” (2018, 106).

Now, dualisms often feature as a problematic characteristic of the humanist subject, the very same that Rosi Braidotti advocates should be abandoned in favor of a post-anthropocentric take on all life forms (2013), one that is more inclusive, equal, and polymorphic. Her posthuman subject, which readers might expect the bamboo to embody, leaves behind the humanist “dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness,” with difference being understood as “pejoration” (2013, 15). Yet, even as the humans on Pax tend towards the posthuman due to the stated intent of their mission and their chosen lifestyle based on peace and cross-species mediation, the plant, a non-human *zoe* entity, relies on dualisms to set up a communication channel with them, qualifying dualisms as the root of reality. The bamboo, it seems, might be more humanist than the pacifists. However, as their ability to communicate improves to the point that they are speaking to each other fluently in human language, which the bamboo ‘writes’ on one of his stems by altering his pigments to form words, it is inferred that dualisms are only the first step to an enhanced understanding of reality. Indeed, it is often reiterated that the bamboo and the humans alike are striving to achieve a form of balance (2018, 137, 140, 176), both between the two species and individually, as they engage in ‘mutualism’ (a

word they use to describe their peaceful and willing collaboration). Consider this passage, in which the Bamboo is speaking:

“I am pleased to be a moderator, especially a co-moderator. Duality is good in moderators, animal and plant, transient and permanent, a stronger leadership for Pax and a perfect balance, as Bartholomew explained. I have examined the polysaccharide in my most active roots and come to conclusions about equality.”

“Are we equal?”

“Equality is not a fact, like the length of days. Clearly I am superior to you in size and age and intelligence. Equality is an idea, a belief, like beauty. The duality at root is barbarity and civilization.” (2018, 180-181)

Duality, according to the bamboo, remains one of the building blocks of reality, but it is in striking the correct balance between two extremes that civilized co-existence can happen. Towards the end of the novel, the bamboo himself comments: “My humor root suggests that I am becoming more like an animal” (2018, 312), concretely drawing a connection with Braidotti’s understanding of identity formation through relationality—that is, of *zoe* entities whose identity shifts and re-forms according to their encounter with other living beings. Moreover, Braidotti’s own understanding of difference in the posthuman is positive: whereas the humanist subject considered the Other as necessarily inferior, the posthuman subject sees difference as a source of relationality. In meeting different subjects, a living being can change, and thus grow. The bamboo, for all that he relates to humans and finds points of contact, is still configured as a *different* living entity, with a *different* intelligence and *different* needs and instincts which he should and will not suppress to be more easily accepted by the humans. His intelligence, thus, complements that of human beings.

At this point, I tackle one of the above-mentioned questions: what effect does the inner focalization from the perspective of a plant have on the readers?

According to Bernaerts et al., non-human narrators work on a “*double dialectic* of empathy and defamiliarization, human and non-human experientiality” (2014, 69, italics in the original). Focusing on the first pair, empathy and defamiliarization, one might expect to find both in equal measure in *Semiosis*. However, I would like to argue that this does not match the story and the emotions it transmits. First, defamiliarization is certainly present, but not overwhelmingly so. The bamboo, due to his profound intelligence, which is also emotional,¹ does not feel overly

¹ I use ‘emotional intelligence’ as defined by Andrew Colman in the *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, rather than in the layman usage first adopted by Daniel Goleman in his 1995 book of the same title: “Ability to monitor one’s own and other people’s emotions, to discriminate

foreign to our human sensibility. He is different, but not in such a radical way that it disrupts our understanding of intelligence and sentience. Second, Bernaerts et al. argue that “a lot of non-human narratives point to the fact that people may conceive the other (person, animal) as an object in order to cope with reality and to maintain one’s own subjectivity or superiority” (2014, 70). If this were true in *Semiosis*, we would expect the plant to be treated as an inferior being, something against which to impose human superiority. Yet, the spirit of the mission to Pax, which aims at settling a human colony within the existing ecosystem avoiding environmental disruptions, makes the humans embrace complete alterity, or at least entities that diverge from their set of earthly expectations. Even though at the beginning some struggle with understanding plants as sentient beings, (“Plants are not that smart” [2018, 27]; “Plants can’t think!” [2018, 29]), the true nature of the plants as creatures capable of high intelligence is embraced by the colonizers from generation one. In other words, the process of displacement of human hegemony over other species advocated by Braidotti, among others, begins with the creation of the constitution of Pax, drafted on earth and undersigned by the colonizers before leaving the planet. Non-human narration in *Semiosis* thus matches one of the functions identified by Bernaerts et al.: “it reveals the problematic ways in which humans relate to their physical environment and to other living creatures” (2014, 70) and displaces the human perspective on a holistic ecosystem.

Weaving post-anthropocentric concepts into the very goal of the human mission to Pax makes the readers accept them as a given, as part of the initial framework within which the story will develop, regardless of their own perception of nature and species hierarchy; at the same time, letting the plant speak for himself, letting him express beliefs, hopes, and intentions that do not stray too far from the ones of the humans stimulates literary empathy—the other half of Bernaerts et al.’s first dialectic. As Suzanne Keen writes,

In empathy, sometimes described as an emotion in its own right, we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others. Empathy is thus agreed to be both affective and cognitive by most psychologists. Empathy is distinguished in both psychology and philosophy (though not in popular usage) from *sympathy*, in which feelings *for* another occur. (2006, 208, emphasis in the original)

Empathy being both affective and cognitive relates it to the act of reading literature: “when texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers’ thinking” (Keen 2006, 213). It has long

between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour” (Colman 2015).

been argued that first-person narratives enhance empathy, in that they offer the readers privileged access to the thoughts and emotions of a character. However, for the very same reason they might equally hinder empathy if the character and the readers are dissonant. Keen singles out two narrative features with which literary empathy is often associated: “character identification” and “narrative situation (including point of view and perspective)” (2006, 216). The first happens in the reader, potentially due to a set of narrative choices on the part of the author, and should be considered a narrative *effect* rather than a *technique*. The latter, instead, is the set of narrative and stylistic choices that the author made to enhance character identification and empathy. The techniques that are usually connected to the most empathic response are those offering an internal perspective: first-person self-narration, figural narration (told in the third person but focalizing on a single character), omniscient narration that offers insights into the thoughts of characters, free indirect discourse (or, narrated monologue) (Adamson 2001, quoted in Keen 2006, 219; Miall 1988; Booth 1983). The general trend is to favor techniques that draw the audience closer to the characters, letting them relate intensely with them. Accordingly, one might think that empathy is enhanced by settings that are closer to the lived experience of the readers. Keen, counterintuitively, argues the opposite: the more explicitly fictional a story is, the ‘safer’ it is for a reader to let an empathic bond form because they are exempted from the “obligations of self-protections. [...] Thus they may respond with greater empathy to an unreal situation and characters because of the protective fictionality, but still internalize the experience of empathy with possible later real-world responsiveness to others’ needs” (2006, 220).

Semiosis ticks all the right boxes on the list of narrative features necessary to enhance empathy: it features a group of homodiegetic first-person narrators who give us access to their thoughts and insights, and an otherworldly setting ensuring that the readers can be immersed in a safe environment where to let their moral judgment and empathic response run free.

Moreover, inhabiting the plant’s perspective after being introduced to the colonizers’ holistic conception of the planet and its ecosystem feels like a natural transition: the humans’ understanding of the planet and its ecosystem as equally, if not more, important than themselves frames the readers’ perception of it as a living being, a *zoe* entity in Braidotti’s sense, implying that it should have a voice, emotions, and intelligence, regardless of its difference from our traditional conception of these features.

It helps, as it did in keeping defamiliarization at bay, that the bamboo’s intelligence and understanding of the world are so similar to ours. The process of anthropomorphization is honed in with no hitches, and the bamboo is framed as an Other that is actually in continuity with

humanity, rather than in opposition. Inhabiting the plant's perspective, readers are led into non-human experientiality, which they will necessarily compare to their human one, returning to the second dialectic suggested by Bernaerts et al.

The bamboo, though, defies expectations to an extent. As we have seen before, the plant insists on being the most intelligent creature on the planet, and superior to the humans. It has a shrewd mind and a very aggressive, dominating behaviour. Recalling Donly's claim that we need new narratives moving away from conflict, the plant once more seems to be too humanist (plantist, perhaps?) in his understanding of the relations among *zoe* entities on Pax. Yet, humans 'import' peace to the planet, and pacifism is transmitted to the plant as a core value of the human colony. There is, in a sense, a reverse process with respect to Le Guin's work mentioned before, and to much of human history.

2. Let the planet speak for itself

In *Semiosis*, the bamboo is not only in continuous conversation with the humans but also with other plant and animal species. Through him, the readers are allowed to glimpse into the minds of other vegetal beings and experience the network of relationships binding them together. The planet as a whole, then, the entire ecosystem, is given a voice.

Traditionally, narratology has focused on characters and events, rather than on settings (Caracciolo 2013, 425), but we are witnessing a newfound interest in the narrative backdrop. Erin James, for instance, dedicated her work *The Storyworld Accord* (2015) to exploring what it means for readers to immerse themselves into different, imagined environments. She writes:

[Cognitive narrative theorists] define a storyworld as a mental model of context and environment within which a narrative's characters function. Like the similar terms *story* and *fabula*, storyworld is a term narrative theorists use to discuss what happens in a narrative. But more so than other terms, the storyworld highlights the world-making power of narrative texts. Storyworld scholars argue that narrative comprehension relies upon readers interpreting textual cues to make mental models of a text's world and inhabiting those models emotionally. To understand a narrative, such scholars suggest, we must lose ourselves in the same environment and experiences as a narrative's characters. [...] Storyworlds are always mediated by someone (a narrator or focalizing character) and are thus necessarily imagined representations of material realities (2015, x-xii)

The storyworld of *Semiosis* is mediated both by the human narrators and by the bamboo, who is the one giving voice to other *zoe* entities. Pax is understood by the humans as a planet with its own self-regulating balance, within which they would like to find a niche for themselves (2018, 9). For instance, Octavo, one of the original colonizers and the first narrator, argues:

“nature balances. Something has to be the natural biological control for the snow vines” (2018, 25). The humans see Pax as one being, with all its creatures acting as a whole (2018, 30)—like limbs of a human body, if you will excuse an anthropomorphizing simile. This is aligned with the Gaia hypothesis formulated by James Lovelock in the 1970s, which understands the earth as a self-regulating system: the theory “proposes that the responses of living organisms to environmental conditions ultimately bring about changes that make the earth better adapted to support life; the system would rid itself of any species that adversely affects the environment” (Martin and Hine 2015). Not only do the humans understand Pax in such terms: the bamboo himself embraces this holistic vision of the planet.

The issue with having a planet that talks, thinks, and makes decisions through rational evaluations is that we cannot explain the Gaia hypothesis only through instinct or natural inclination. Balance, which is at the core of both the hypothesis and the bamboo’s way of living and understanding reality, needs to be achieved through a continuous act of mediation, bargaining, and communication. In short, all species need a lingua franca. If balance is the common goal, such a communication device seems to be, against all odds and Donly’s wishes mentioned at the beginning of this essay, conflict, or at least shrewd *quid-pro-quo* interactions that either discourage or lead to conflict.

Although the humans (try to) import peace and the bamboo understands and embraces the pacifist way, the rest of the ecosystem interacts through conflict. In the opening pages of the novel, for instance, the humans realize that their dead are casualties of a war between plants that “had begun long before we arrived because war was their way of life” (2018, 1). When the humans decide to approach the other intelligent animals on the planet, the Glassmakers, they realize they have become a violent, conflictual species due to social breakdown. As they fail to coexist peacefully, pacifists are forced to find allies in what ends up being an all-out war against the Glassmakers. The bamboo acts as the intermediary and bargains with the other plants to poison, attack, and, eventually, kill those among the Glassmakers who have become irreversibly violent.

It is in the interaction of the bamboo with the other vegetal species that we understand both his ability to evolve and relinquish his original conflictual nature in favor of pacifism, and his acceptance that other plants have different degrees of intelligence and personal interests that might not align with his and the pacifists’. The second-to-last chapter of the novel, narrated by Stevland and Lucille, is a polyphony of non-human voices, each tailored to a single speaking plant.

Tulips, for instance, are very simple creatures ('don't be a tulip' is often used as a way to say 'don't be silly'), and the language is simplified accordingly. Stevland expresses his patience and superiority while narrating his interaction with them:

"Pests here," I say, sending the message through rootlets to a thousand tulips.
 "Pests. Bad." "Bad." "Bad." "Bad." "Bad." "Bad," they answer one by one. My humor root observes that they have little to say but are talkative nonetheless. [...]
 "Helper here," I say to those fields of tulips. "Helper chemical. Pest go." [...] I show the formula. I repeat this explanation dozens of times for each plant, since they are slow learners. [...] They are stupid, but self-interest is not related to intelligence. (2018, 242-243)

Lentils react similarly to tulips and share equally simple communication patterns. Pineapples, instead, are "intelligent but stubborn" (2018, 243). After a lengthy bargain to convince them that the humans are not to be blamed for their mistreatment, the pineapples declare:

"The humans must enforce the agreement. You [the bamboo] own them."
 "We beg your help to overcome the predators."
 "Our contract includes protection from predators. We will add terpenes to make our fruit inedible."
 "I propose something better than terpenes, because intelligent animals might like terpenes, the way they harvest pine wax. They can simply learn to burn the terpenes off. Your terminal tufts would make good torches that could be eaten."
 "Poison instead," one plant says, and it becomes a chorus. "Poison." "Poison." "Poison."
 "Closer to my idea. But it is not necessary to kill the animals."
 "These animals should be killed. These are pests. Your animals would approve. The humans extirpate weeds. This would be like eliminating weeds." (2018, 244)

As soon as we encounter another intelligent, but not civilized, plant, the suggestion to kill the pests (the Glassmakers) because they are hurting the crops is quick to come. Only Stevland's mediation convinces the other species to drug the Glassmakers instead of eliminating them. Moreover, the pineapples understand Stevland and the humans' symbiotic relationship as control and possession, and demand he makes them uphold their end of the bargain. They cannot conceive of mutualism, only of power relations based on domination.

The locustwood has a similar understanding of *zoe* relations. He—the male spokesplant—is an arrogant, domineering tree who does not like the bamboo.

"What do we get, bamboozler?" the locustwood speaker asks. "We are being cut down by the intruders. We value our relationship with the city animals, too. We have much to offer." A taste of ethylene in the message makes my rootlets freeze as the auxins are inhibited. As I said, he is aggressive. [...]

“We have excess ethylene,” the speaker says. “That would hurt many plants, including pineapples and tulips.”

“I have no choice but to agree. You know that.”

“We offer a fair bargain.” [...] (2018, 246)

“Move me closer to useful animals, farther from you.” I realize that I am not the only plant with a humor root.

“Name your useful animal.”

“Fitch.”

“Extinct.” Due to bamboo.

“Gecko dragon.”

“Slow, stupid, and venomous. Perfect for you.”

“Humans work for fancy, fruity, oversized grass. What do they see in you?”

“Fruit-eaters like fancy fruit,” I tell him. “I treat them well.” He sends me some fructose, fruit sugar. I send some xylose, wood sugar. Even before I grew a humor root, I understood that sugar is a comical substance because its chemical structure is exceedingly fussy. Locustwood is rarely in such a good humor. Sugar! (2018, 275)

In the first part of the conversation, the locustwood is bargaining by threatening to hurt other allies of the bamboo, essentially blackmailing him into an agreement. The language is brash, the locustwood calls Stevland ‘bamboozler’ and bullies him. The second part, after they manage to subdue the Glassmakers, has a lighter tone. Stevland, who has grown a humor root at the suggestion of the humans, banter with the locustwood, cheekily offending him. Burke’s decision to manipulate language to characterize the plants conveys aptly the variety of creatures populating Pax, but also their ability to find a way to relate to each other at different levels.

Similar mediating practices of communication exist also with and between animals: moths bring bits of meat to the bamboo in exchange for nectar, informing him of changes to the fauna (2018, 326); humans interact with bats, fippokats, and fippolions using different languages. Bats, especially, have developed a system of communication based on rewards: they inform the humans about changes to the environment in exchange for food, and once, notably, they try to get information by bringing food to the humans. Their language is also very simple but effective, and it has geographic varieties (2018, 199). Finally, the Glassmakers have a complex language based both on sound, writing, and smell. The difficulty in communication is, among other factors, one of the main issues with approaching Glassmakers peacefully. Yet, as soon as they decide to start interacting with the humans, their relationship improves, and they find a way to co-exist in the city.

Pax never speaks with one voice, but this does not mean that the planet does not communicate at all. What Braidotti calls “becoming-earth” (2013, 66), the act of entering in a relational bond with the environment, is replicated in every cross-species interaction. By letting a polyphony of

voices be heard, we return to a conception of a polymorphic posthuman subjectivity that exists through contact with other *zoe* entities, and that grows, learns, and changes thanks to it.

Burke's narrative choices, protagonists, narrators, and storyworld all point towards an intention to build a posthuman ecosystem, where the human is displaced in favor of a post-anthropocentric perspective. I would like to claim that the author succeeds to an extent, especially with regard to the depiction of those relational bonds that Braidotti places at the core of posthuman subjectivity and to her *zoe*-centric perspective. Yet, it is undeniable that Burke does not stray too far from well-worn narrative paths based on conflict, and the limited defamiliarization that pervades the whole novel demarks an inability to shake off the habitual in favor of something completely Other. Indeed, early reviewers of *Semiosis* have lamented the "too human" nature of the bamboo (Bourke 2018), and the "rather terran" depiction of the alien flora and fauna (Gerhart 2018, 235). Stevland appropriating a male name and masculine pronouns could attract similar criticism as well, considering the perpetuation of stereotypes connected to gender and the way in which the bamboo is characterized. Liz Bourke does comment on the somewhat heteronormative dynamics of the novel (2018), which encompass the entire narrative and are not limited to the bamboo. For instance, early in the story, women are pushed to choose fertile mates to bear as many children as possible (2018, 47), and second-generation Sylvia is raped as a punishment for her disobedience (2018, 69), reiterating the sexual exploitation of the (very few) female bodies on the planet. Yet, in a generation's time, women start reclaiming their reproductive choices. When Higgins, one of the few fertile men of generation three and the father of many generation-four babies, laments that every woman loves him but none of them wants to be his wife, Sylvia tells him:

Each generation sets its own rules. [...] The women of your generation have worked things out, and they have their own agreement about you. They haven't told me but I know about it and I'm sure they haven't told you but you've probably guessed. They prefer sterile husbands because they can control how often they get pregnant. Too often and they'd bear less healthy babies. And you have good genes, very good genes, and they think they're lucky to have you. They share you, they use you, and I think it's cruel and I know you don't like it but I can't interfere, and it's harder to do nothing than I ever thought it would be. (2018, 121)

I believe those heteronormative roles remarked upon by Liz Bourke would better be understood in context: my impression is that Sue Burke ties them to the necessity of the human colony to stabilize on the planet and mostly does away with them as soon as the pacifists find their footing. Vestiges of our human, heteronormative past survive in later chapters, but they recur less frequently and are much less impactful. For instance, one of the most evident sexist sentences

comes from Nye, the *teenage* narrator of Chapter Five, who thinks: “Floating ribbons were trying to snag a spot for winter in the trees that were already losing their leaves. These were all the interesting things that women didn’t have time for because they worried about people instead of things” (2018, 185). This reads, to me, more like a child complaining about something he does not fully grasp than a true indicator of deeply entrenched sexism within the pacifists. Remarkably, most of what we traditionally associate with heteronormativity is *not* present in the novel: women can be—and often are—leaders; they are equal members of society who can choose their role within the community, and although some form of gender bias persists, especially in connection to child-rearing, it is not perceived as an intrusive or negative feature of the pacifist community.

As for the bamboo appropriating a masculine name, this could easily be interpreted as a sign that the bamboo is more attuned to the human males due to their stereotypical features—physical strength, aggressiveness, assertiveness—thus reiterating the very heteronormativity that posthumanism is so set on demolishing. However, very significantly, the bamboo does not choose ‘Stevland’ because it is a masculine name, but for its symbolic value. As Octavio remarks in the opening pages: “Someday we would develop complete taxonomies of our new home’s life-forms. The most important, we’d agreed, would be named after Stevland Barr, in honor of the first death among us” (2018, 7). The bamboo is aware of that and, given his self-attributed superiority to all other life forms on the planet, he appropriates the name reserved for the most important species. The features of the bamboo do resemble those traditionally associated with males in human societies, but tying them to his choice of a masculine name would, in my view, mean forcing the text—the bamboo was a shrewd, domineering, aggressive being even before human genders were introduced into the planet. These are *the bamboo’s* features, that we tend to interpret as masculine even before he chooses his human name. ‘Accusing’ the bamboo of reiterating heteronormative roles by choosing an incidentally masculine name (Stevland could very easily have been a female name if the first casualty had been a woman) speaks more about *our* gender biases, as we cannot conceive of an Other that performs a given, natural set of attributes without framing them within our traditional understanding of gender roles.

In conclusion, *Semiosis*, with its depiction of non-human life forms as sentient, independent, yet interrelated beings, attempts to tell a story of newly attributed (or, rather, newly recognized) agency, of human displacement and of a reckoning that another way forward—the Pax way—is indeed possible and, perhaps, desirable. By letting the plant speak for himself, it gives voice to the ecosystem as a whole and displaces the anthropocentric notion that humans are superior to

other forms of life. The novel, therefore, leverages a non-human narrator to situate the readers within an unfamiliar perspective, deploying techniques that enhance an empathic response to prompt a reflection on our real-life experience of our ecosystem and the way we construe and treat it. Nevertheless, due to the continuous recourse to familiar patterns, terminology, characterization, and interactions among the protagonists, the novel falls short of depicting a radically Other world, hinting at the possibility for total alterity without ever materializing it.

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