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This is your morning

I left the US, the land of my birth, sickened by racial injustice. But the return to a homeland is not a simple matter

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Cosmopolitanism - Demography and migration - Biography and memoir

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Edited by Brigid Hains

'Oh, you are beautiful.' The security official tilts her head and breaks into a broad smile, a toothpick caught in the side of her mouth. The loose ends of her cornrows peek out from the back of her navy beret. The cotton of her light blue button-down is taut against her stomach. She is leaning casually against the X-ray machine as my items pass through on the conveyor belt. The line of people is filling up behind me, their groans and sighs increasing as the voice over the intercom announces yet another delay.

'Thank you,' I say to the official. I assume she is looking for a weekend blessing, a few hundred naira to make the morning's efforts worth something. I am travelling back to Abuja from a work trip to Lagos and, already, two airport officials have asked me for 'something for the weekend'.

'Are you mixed?' she asks, still smiling. She looks sincere.

'No.'

'Where are you from?' Her tone is curious and teasing. There is no accusation, no questioning of my right. But still, my back stiffens instinctively. I prepare my armour.

'Imo.' I step up as the passenger ahead of me moves. I am rehearsed in this routine and anticipate her next question.

'Both your parents are Nigerian?' Her voice is a pitcher of disbelief pouring over my black tote and gold sandals coming off the conveyor. I busy myself looping my thin animal-print leather belt through my black cigarette trousers.

'Yes,' I force a smile back, barely looking at her. I am used to this question. I am not used to how it makes me feel.

Her smile breaks into a laugh as she tilts her head back before gazing at me more intently. 'I na asu Igbo?'

'No.' I do not speak my own language. I pick up my tote and walk away before she can call me oyibo.

'Oyibo.' It means 'white man'. I read somewhere once it means 'no skin'. When I first came back to the country months ago, it was harder, this being called foreigner, this being called white. I had just left the United States, a country determined to beat into such people as me that I am anything but white, that I am anything but welcome. I do not want this naming. Not in my own country. Not anywhere. I am brown like them, my people. But no one says: 'Welcome home.' In airports, hotels and supermarkets they say: 'Where are you from?' And when I answer, they shake their heads in refusal.

'It is not possible.'

'You are not Nigerian.'

'It is a lie.'

'Your own yellow is different.'

It is a new day. I have to renew my Nigerian passport. I have asked my aunt for a contact at the immigration office so it doesn't take me a million hours to do a simple task. Yahaya, the driver, slows down as we near the entrance, and then brings the car to a complete stop. There is a young man in a light brown uniform with a rifle slung loosely across his shoulder inspecting the car directly in front. He waves that driver through the gate, and motions for us to move forward. I glance down at my office ID card in my hand making sure it is the right face up and that my Igbo name is clearly visible. It is one small way of letting him know that I am Nigerian. I catch his eye from the backseat as he saunters over to my open window, rests his arm casually on the car and bends to peer in at me. He is flirting. Every smile in this place is textured. I am learning to feel out the lines, to read curves like braille.

'Madam, you are welcome.'

'Thank you. I have an appointment.'

'To see who, Madam?' His eyes smooth over my body like someone icing a cake. I clutch my ID tag tighter and lift my hand slightly to make it more visible.

'Mrs Anyanwu.' On the drive over, I had practised saying the immigration official's name out loud to Yahaya over and over, until I got the pronunciation right, until my American accent didn't betray me.

It does not matter that I have come back. In his eyes, I am different. I am American. I might as well have no skin

He nods his head slowly and glances towards the driver: 'Brawse, open the boot.' He snakes away from my window to inspect the boot, his wet smile dripping on my blouse. The car shakes when he slams the trunk shut, and then he is up at Yahaya's window. 'Na oyibo?'

'No be full o. Na half.' I am sitting in the backseat as they negotiate my identity between them.

'Oya, make you drop am for main building then go park for side.' He waves us forward, nodding at me in the backseat.

As soon as the car moves I speak: 'Yahaya, why did you tell that man I was half oyibo?'

'Aunty, is it not so? You are not like us now?' He means to say I am not fully Nigerian. I was not raised here. I do not even speak the language of the people I am trying to claim. It does not matter that both my parents are from the East. It does not matter that I have come back. In his eyes, I am different. To Yahaya, my driver born in Kogi state – who has lived in northern

Nigeria his entire life, and is fluent in his native Igala, in the regional Hausa and in the Queen's English – I am American. I might as well have no skin.

We are driving back to my office. We stop at Berger junction. I gaze out the window past the sludge of stalled green taxis and the cluster of people standing haphazardly along the side roads. I catch myself wondering how I came to live here, in this home that is not yet my home. Five months have passed since my returning. I am worn. When my people deny me, I no longer labour with insistence. I shrug my shoulders. I shape my lips into plastic lines. I do not argue with them to claim me. I had not thought about not fitting in. I had thought only of a home.

'It is your birthright.' She says it firmly, staring at me over her wine glass. My Ghanaian friend, she was born and raised, like me, in another man's land. I am visiting her home in New York City. I have left Nigeria again, my sixth time in nine months. She tells me: 'To be Nigerian is your birthright. No one can tell you what it means to be Nigerian. You get to discover that on your own.' Her version is trimmed with indignant hope.

Back in Abuja, I sit outside at the one café where the coffee is strong and costs less than $3. I have made a new friend over the past two weeks, Jamal.

'You don't want to settle here permanently do you?' Jamal slouches in the wicker chair, a cigarette hanging loosely from his right hand. His great-grandfather came to Nigeria in the 1920s from Lebanon. Jamal was born and raised in Kano. He knows more of this country, it seems, than I ever will. I shrug. 'Not sure. Let me just get through this first year.'

'Have you spent much time in Lebanon?' I ask.

'I lived there for one year. But that was enough. They are like here, you know, just want to take from you. Once I learned that, I just came back.'

'So you don't have any allegiance there?'

'What is Nigerian? Who is Nigerian? There is no such thing'

'I used to, you know.' He sits up and puts out his cigarette in the ceramic bowl on the table between us. 'I used to have such a strong allegiance, like very, very strong. But then I went and saw how they treated me because I had just come. I didn't need that shit.' He waves his arm dismissively in the air: 'Fuck that. I left.'

I say nothing. I marvel slightly at the ease by which he can throw away his Lebanese identity. The uniformed gateman walks past us just beyond the patio. Jamal calls out and says something to him in Hausa. The man stops, faces Jamal respectfully and replies. When they are finished I ask: 'So you consider yourself fully Nigerian?'

'What is Nigerian?' He looks at me squarely and laughs. He reclines back in his chair. 'Who is Nigerian? There is no such thing. He does not think I am Nigerian.' He lifts his head slightly in the direction the gateman has taken. I understand. It took me less than a month to recognise that people here identify you by your ethnicity first.

My friend Bayo emails me from Washington. He left Nigeria when he was a baby and came back to visit only 30-odd years later. He has his own work. He writes to me: 'I know I've told you that this leaving America, this moving back, it's a massive leap of faith. I respect you for it, but you've never told me why you've decided to move to Nigeria now.'

I do not respond right away. I do not know yet how to arrange my words for an answer. A month passes. I write to Bayo:

> I didn't tell you because how could it be enough to say that the earth there was fragile and cracking, and I was falling through gravel and soil, and slipping between those spaces that separate continents. Or even to say simply that I was lost. In America I felt home less. If I make it two words it sounds less offensive to apply it to myself, I who am rich by global standards. Remember how global means beyond America? AFROPOLITAN. I don't like that word they use to describe us. It is a weak and leaky word that lets the challenge and the trial drip out from what is a much more complicated thing. There is little chic about being from two countries, both of which struggle to claim you.

I can write this way to Bayo. He knows what it means to straddle narratives. He knows that leaving home and coming home are full of unstitchings. I

started leaving the US in fragments, through small undoings that came with each trip away over the course of two years. Each time, I stepped out of the country and remembered that there were other ways to live and to be seen in the world. And when I had finally come undone, I left because I could no longer stay there without sinking into a thickening mire of anger towards a system of deep and increasingly blatant racial injustice. I left because my bent towards creative writing was straightening into a rigid pole of polemic op-eds. I left because I was tired of the false narrative of Whiteness.

My heart twists still. It is purple-blue bruised and ugly – what is happening back home, in the US

I am here now, in this other country, the place that should be my home, trying to see kinsmen in strangers. I am here wondering if it is possible for someone like me to call just one place home, if it is necessary or vital? I am here wondering if I can really just get up and leave the US, the place of my birth, because I'm exhausted by the race problem? I try to settle in, oceans away from the country where a white teenage boy once asked his pastor if it was okay with God that my then (white) boyfriend was dating me, a black girl.

I listen and watch what is happening to this place that birthed me, this self-proclaimed home of the free and land of the brave. I watch what happens to others who look like me, who are also born there. Who call the US their home. Eric Garner, the father in New York, choked to death by police. Michael Brown, the student in Ferguson, shot to death by police. Tamir Rice, the child playing in the park in Cleveland, shot and killed by police. I watch the tension rise like smoke from a forest fire, thick and suffocating and billowing black. I thought it would be different watching from the outside, no longer living there. But my heart twists still. My mouth dries up. My stomach plunges like I've swallowed rocks by mistake, the way flies get in where the air is rancid. It is purple-blue bruised, swelling and ugly – what is happening back home, in the US.

Transnational. Afropolitan. Multicultural. Global citizen. Third Culture Kid. There is always a name that fits like a copied dress from a bad tailor. I was an African in the diaspora, a US citizen with more than one allegiance. Here, I am a returnee. I have come back only to discover a different way to not belong. An unprecedented sadness that fans wild like flora in a sea of constant becoming. That is what I did not expect. When you are raised away from your home country, your native home (what do you call it?), and you decide to move back as an adult, there is no real preparation for the emotional shock of feeling out of place in the space that is supposed to be yours. There is no warning of the mourning that will seep. It cannot be undone.

There is part of my identity as a Nigerian, as an Igbo girl that can never be reclaimed. It is the part that comes with regular childhood visits to my father's village, with being taught Igbo at the same time I was learning English, with days in the kitchen as a young girl watching my mother and aunts and older cousins chop up okra for my favourite soup. I will tell others about this, about the unexpected grief, about the mourning, others who want to come back but who have never really been. I will say: 'Expect to grieve because you will come to understand how much was lost when they took you towards what they thought was a better life.'

I land in another airport. The large letters spell out words I pronounce poorly: Akanu Ibiam International. This is Enugu. This is the East. Igboland. I stare at everything. Nostalgia surprises me. I have not known this city, here where my mother traipsed off to elementary school, where she went from a girl to a woman, where her marriage began. Something in me splits open and the amber dust, the hills and their narrow roads, the banana leaves spilling over high walls, they bleed into my spirit and flow through me like a prayer.

On my own, I do not have all the pieces to tell the story, my own story. That is what I have discovered mostly. I have dug in my heels and broken earth in other countries, without any significant ties to this country and to the region where my parents and grandparents were raised, where they learned how to make sense of the world. Nigeria is the place that grew the people that made me. Sacred ground. Here, where there is so little to rely on, no healthcare, no steady electricity, no trustworthy security, and no government that seems to care for its people. I ask myself quietly, can this be sacred ground?

How do you confess aloud that you come from a place that unstitches you?

'You children need to understand Igbo.' That is what I wish they had said to me growing up, the people that made me. I wish my parents had spoken that language, their language, to us. I wish that when I said my own name it sounded like it came from the soil where my mother was planted. I have not grasped what it means to have been sown, to grow from a patch of earth that receives you as its own.

At night, when it feels more difficult to understand why I am here, why I felt pulled back to a place I've never known, I recite the things for which I am grateful. I assure myself that I do not have to understand it all to stay. I just need more days and months to acclimatise. I trust my gut, that coming was the right decision, even with the pain, the type that is still so hard to speak of and to admit. How do you confess aloud that you come from a place that unstitches you?

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'Mgbe onye tete bu ututu ya.' Ngozi, my new friend sends me a text in Igbo. We have discovered we are from the very same village on our paternal side. She vows to ask her father if we are related. She believes we must be. I read her text, the one she assumes I will understand. I text her back and ask her to translate. She calls me instead, laughing.

'Are you serious?' she says. I am serious. I want to tell her to stop laughing. But I laugh with her.

'Just tell me what it means.'

'When you wake up, that is your morning.' She continues: 'You know Igbo is full of proverbs, right? It's how we say it is never too late to do your own work, or achieve what you have to achieve. Everybody's timing is different.'

My stomach responds before the tears fall. It is exactly what I needed to hear. But that is not why I am crying.

It is the first time that God has spoken to me in Igbo.

The power of anonymous

Is the figure of the author bad for literature? Un-authored Roman literature and the transcendence of mere individuality

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The ancient world - Stories and literature - Politics and government

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Edited by Sam Haselby

Anonymous works of art and literature tend to rend and vex their audience. Debate still simmers over whether the UK street artist Banksy's fugitive identity is a compelling act of cultural critique, or an annoying and cynical publicity stunt. The same goes for the elusive, self-created pseudonym of an Italian novelist, Elena Ferrante: is the 'real' Ferrante's absence making an important feminist point about anonymous authorship, flipping a genuine middle finger to the publishing industry and the capitalist culture of self-promotion, or is it a glorified money-spinner, a bare strategy of generating interest and sales, a joke, as it were, on us? Because anonymous works leave a crucial gap as a placeholder for the author's 'rightful' position, they open themselves to the wild and contradictory gamut of responses. They can also give rise to other elec-

tric acts of creativity, responses stretching from conspiracy theories, to informed speculation, to new ways of understanding authorship, to new works of art and criticism.

Anonymity achieves much more than this spur to creative response, or this spurt of audience engagement. Not knowing the author of a literary work does something powerful to the reader: it makes her experience the words as an exemplary, representative, far-reaching burst of culture, a spark of art that seems to transcend the limits of the singular intelligence. Ferrante, for example, has won glowing praise for representing the world of women, or female friendship[1], in general. The potential of the anonymous work is in its ability to throw the reader into the realm of apparent universality. The question, then, is whether a work of literature's oomph is actually jeopardised or atrophied by the presence of the author. If they all left, would we miss authors after all? Or would their departure make their work stronger?

Ancient Rome is a prime setting for grasping the power of anonymity, for Romans of the Classical world often acknowledged its power negatively, adversely. Literature for the Romans was primarily the product of a singular intelligence, a coherent creative force, known by shorthand as an author. A literary text without authorship was often thought of as something dark, mysterious, lacking and disabled. In fact, a whole part-industry of scholarship sprouted up around securing attribution, making sure, that is, that the right texts had their proper authors, and that readers could know the worth of what they read.

When a Roman reader pictured the origins of a canonical work of literature, it was typically as the fruit of a real, flesh-and-blood, historical individual. This was reflected in the very way that libraries stored their goods: a ticket would hang off the end of the scroll marking the two most salient hashtags of identification: title of work and name of author. Even when there was no clear single point of origin for a work – eg, when the authorship was genuinely shared – Ancient readers invented one: it could never just be the Iliad or the Odyssey; it had to be the Iliad or Odyssey of Homer. There was little space in the culture of authorship for works whose author was properly unknown; and many modern readers have inherited these exclusionary tastes.

Still now, the value of a piece of literature seems pegged to the currency of the name it bears. It needn't be this way. The anonymous literature of Ancient Rome is a species with its own special genius, its own idiomatic capabilities. When we recognise it as an incubation chamber for the power of anonymity, it shows us that literature can sometimes get on better without a Homer or equivalent to chaperone it into our consciousness. Names tame certain forces; anonymity unleashes them. That is, freedom from the author can generate new possibilities for literature, and new experiences of reading it.

What could anonymous words on a page do that authored words don't? One way toward an answer is through a reading experience common to both us and the Romans: graffiti. Now, of course, graffiti is a different register of writing than high, published, consecrated literature. All the same, the chain reaction of thought it sets off in a reader can be useful for understanding anonymous works of creative literature too.

Imagine yourself stumbling across a big, raw line of political graffiti etched on a public wall, perhaps something like 'Smash Capitalism Now!' Part of the power and shock of the statement is that it hovers in the world of the unsigned, set free from the constraints and relativism of an individual subjectivity. If we knew the name of the single scribe calling upon us to smash capitalism this very minute, we wouldn't take it as seriously. It wouldn't siphon as much power, and we wouldn't take it as a loaded act designed to make something happen for many through words. For the graffiti to strike the reader as a sign of revolution in the making depends on the fiction of its collective origins, or its possible unlimited appeal; that is, because it comes from anywhere and nowhere, the sentiment seems to swarm from everywhere. Whether you're for or against this impending revolution, the graffiti carries a potent effect of universality; for a crowded second, you believe, and either you panic or you rejoice.

Proverbs also show the potential power of being unsigned, unhoused. These little snippets of wisdom derive their authority not from their individual crafters (if they could even be recovered) but from the fact that everyone has said them over and over again for a very long time. For Roman writers of the early empire, who prized the weaponising of rhetoric through short, sharp verbal formulations (known as sententiae),

[1] https://aeon.co/essays/how-stories-of-female-friendship-construct-a-sense-of-self

the truth of the proverb carried great purchase. It was a truth understood to come from anonymity as almost tantamount to cultural unanimity.

> Humans constantly simplify the complexities of the world to the intelligent design of a few lucky proper names

Quintilian, a Roman teacher of rhetoric from the second half of the 1st century CE, writes about the authority of proverbs for use in legal rhetoric. He makes the point that even run-of-the-mill sayings and titbits of popular wisdom can have a big impact, precisely because they come across as the products of unbiased minds: 'In some sense they're testimonies, even more powerful because they're not serving specific causes but spoken or created by minds free from resentment and favour – for the sole reason that they seemed the best or the truest things to say.' They seal a nugget of hard truth, and can slip into the mainstream of the cultural commons, 'because they have no known author'. In other words, they possess a different kind of authority than that of a statement with a big name attached. Proverbial words sans author pulse with their own magnetism of exemplarity. Some anonymous works of Roman literature are capable of the same.

Readers tend to be much more accommodating of anonymity in popular genres such as graffiti and proverbs than in high literature. It is generally OK for the 'popular' to come from everywhere and nowhere; however, when it comes to sublime poetry or an intricate novel, readers grow anxious to pin down and picture a source. It's as if the degree of 'authoredness' of a piece of text swells in direct proportion to its place in the ranking system of literary prestige. Compare fan fiction or genre fiction (eg, the 'cheap romance novel') at one end – mostly anonymous, sometimes collectively authored, and correspondingly undervalued in the literary sphere – with James Joyce's novel Ulysses (1922) at the other – single-authored, original, a work of 'genius'.

This elevation of the author-as-person rings particularly true in a culture such as that of the modern capitalist West, which prizes bourgeois individualism so highly, tends to attribute everything of importance that happens on its watch to the super-agency of singular super-agents (eg, Donald Trump, say, or Elon Musk), and so naturally associates the value of its artistic products with their status as autonomous creations of an omnipotent and unique creator. Humans are constantly reducing and simplifying the complexities of the world to the intelligent design of a few lucky proper names. But the truth is, we might get on very well without these super-agent individuals. We might even understand the world better if we didn't lean so heavily on them.

In Roman literature, my favourite example of an anonymous work that makes use of its anonymity to come across as an authoritative proverb writ large is a wonderful historical tragedy, the Octavia. It's impossible to establish from today whether the play was originally released anonymously (although I have a strong hunch that it was, based on the play's strange experimental style that tends to minimise the use of proper names), or whether it merely lost its author as a casualty of textual transmission later down the track. But this doesn't really matter. Whether the author was absent from the off, or left later on, the effect of the play is amplified (rather than stunted) by anonymity.

The anti-anonymity biases of the Classical canon mean that it's unlikely you'll have ever heard of this strange piece of drama. The play is an anonymous masterpiece, and it is about the divorce and exile of Nero's first wife, Octavia, set in 62 CE. It stages the domestic tension and revolutionary springback of absolute power spinning out of control, and it does so with more ambition and urgency than almost any other piece of drama to survive from Ancient Rome. There are a raft of memorable heroes and villains: Octavia the first wife, defiant in being so brutally discarded, the pitiable sacrificial victim of the bloodthirsty tyrant Nero; Nero as said tyrant, a maniacal Henry VIII steamrolling everything good and true to get his way, and crying 'off-with-their-heads' every which way; Seneca, Nero's virtuous but completely ineffective right-hand adviser; the ghost of Agrippina, Nero's murdered mother who acts as the tragedy's revenge totem, cursing the son who had her clipped; a riled-up and revolutionary chorus of the Roman people, who act as partisans of Octavia, rioting and tearing down statues, a brute force that Nero revels in brutally repressing. The play is a serious and committed piece of political literature. It hits the jugular of imperial caprice and violence beautifully, even better than many more renowned works.

The Octavia travelled down to us from antiquity

as part of the corpus of Seneca the younger (ie, the same Seneca as the character above). Seneca was the court philosopher of Nero, a Stoic thinker who left behind a two-pronged attack of literary output: on the one hand, philosophical essays and letters[2]; on the other, tragedies on Greek mythological subjects broaching the big ethical and political questions of the day. The Octavia was lumped in with this latter group, the tragedies, because it has a lot in common with them, linguistically, thematically and dramatically. For example, the repellently tyrannical Nero of the Octavia shares a strong typology with the crazed power-addicts of Senecan tragedy such as King Atreus in the Thyestes, who serves his brother a nice main course of his own children. But there are several reasons ruling out Senecan authorship. Firstly, the improbability of having a play by an author which actually stages that author as a dramatis persona; secondly, there are certain moments in the drama that seem to foreshadow events that happened after Seneca's death, and Seneca, for all his talent, was no clairvoyant; thirdly, the play's linguistic style is also sui generis, compared with the rest of the Senecan corpus. So, if not Seneca, then who?

The logic of impersonality is similar to what we see in modern scientific discourse

Anonymous works tantalise their readers into asking the question 'Whodunnit?', but there are good reasons to resist this summons to detective work. In the Octavia's case, we should take the proposition seriously that the work wants no author. Indeed, that it is much better off without one. What I mean by this is that the play has a few good reasons to duck and weave a single origin, to lie down and play anonymous instead. Let's entertain these conspiracy theories briefly. The first reason could be political sensitivity, or the classic 'anonymity as self-protection' move. It's likely that the play was published and performed at some point in the 20 or so years following Nero's death. At this moment in history, Nero still had significant popularity and following, particularly among Rome's lower classes, but also among certain factions of the elite. It took a while for belief in Nero's monstrosity to catch on and calcify as consensus. Accordingly, it might have been dangerous at this point to attach your name to a play that so uncompromisingly slams Nero as pure evil. The high politics of the Roman empire was, after all, a labile, changeable landscape, where you never quite knew which of today's heroes would wind up as tomorrow's villains. This story, though plausible, takes the more conventional view of anonymity's purpose and effect. It holds that keeping anonymous is a kind of dodge, or a prophylactic strategy: reactive, cautious and defensive. It could be. But there is also more to it.

Rather than this negative constellation of cause and effect for the Octavia's anonymity, there is a more positive and 'active' possibility: that whoever wrote this play was shooting for the same hard-hitting realm of universality and 'truth' achieved by the proverb. Seneca and other major political figures around Nero were eventually nudged into suicide after falling foul of the emperor, and so their surviving faction of elite opposition would have reason to be hostile, would be wielding an axe to grind against Nero's memory. If someone from that faction were out as the author of the Octavia, the risk would be that the play would seem more partial, blinkered and motivated by personal vendetta – not exactly 'free from resentment and favour', as per Quintilian's ideal above.

But if the play were made to seem by no one? Readers or audience members might feel it as a more powerful and exemplary piece of political theatre; a play seriously attempting to express a collective view of 'the Roman people', even as it helps to script that view in the voicing. It would act on readers with a logic of impersonality similar to what we see in modern scientific discourse, whose truth value is boosted by the sense that there are no individuals interfering with the channelling of objective facts. The Octavia would be trying to amplify the memory of Nero as a monster; and its anonymity would help it migrate that sentiment beyond upper-class cut-and-thrust, would make it look like the spontaneous and 'real' eruption of words on a wall, or the consensus view that many mouths had helped to hammer into shape, a slogan for infinite circulation, eventual assent and final absorption into the common verdict of 'cultural memory'. Certainly for us, just under 2,000 years on, the anonymity of the Octavia has the power to make fiction read like history.

The Octavia is just one example of how some special pieces of Roman literature directly mobilise their anonymity to grand effect. Rather than treating these

[2] https://aeon.co/classics/massimo-pigliucci-on-senecas-stoic-philosophy-of-happiness

works as somehow defective or deficient – crippled by the lack of identifiable hands behind them – I would say they should be handled as unique testaments to the power of literature to achieve dazzling pyrotechnics of 'universality', which are at once both real and illusory. Anonymity has its strange ways of convincing the reader to invest in the 'truth' of the words on the page. Literature without authors, in other words, conjures its own eerie source of authority. If we ignore that power of the unknown, we are missing something big. But we do not miss the author.

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Rooted

What if, rather than mere props in the background of our lives, trees embody the history of all life on Earth?

Antarctic Beeches (Nothofagus moorei) in temperate rainforest, Lamington National Park, Queensland, Australia. Photo by Minden Pictures/National Geographic

16 October, 2019

The environment - Biology - Nature and landscape

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3,900 words Edited byNigel Warburton

Place yourself on the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand, near the Franz Josef Glacier. Officially, this forest is a temperate podocarp-hardwood rainforest, but these dry words belie the rich diversity of plant life around, encompassing every imaginable shade of green, brown and grey. They also do an injustice to the experience of standing dwarfed by the soaring trunks of the 400-year-old rimu trees draped in

moss, with their beautifully drooping branches of tiny deep-green needles like a million cascading green waterfalls. And then imagine standing in this forest during an all-too-common torrential rainstorm blown off the nearby Tasman Sea; the literal waterfall from the sky mirrors the vegetative waterfall, and your senses are overwhelmed by the power of water and vegetal life. To stand in this forest is to understand one of the most basic facts about life on Earth: trees are by far the most significant beings on this planet.

Every schoolchild learns some of these seemingly straightforward facts – trees provide us with sustenance, and their photosynthetic activity, along with that of phytoplankton, creates an atmosphere that enables our survival. Without them, the Earth would be uninhabitable – and with their rising rates of death and extinction, the Earth might indeed become uninhabitable soon. Trees also populate our imagination, and many schoolchildren become familiar with trees through fairytales where the forest looms large, or through Aboriginal cultures, where trees are regarded as community members. We are also becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which they improve[1] our mental wellbeing.

And yet, despite the biological and cultural significance of trees, we rarely notice them – a phenomenon that scientists have described[2] as 'plant blindness'. This might have to do with the fact that they are immobile, or that they don't appear to pose danger. It might also have to do with their marginalisation in Western thought – a fact that the philosopher Michael Marder in his

Even when philosophers turn their attention to understanding life processes, they largely ignore trees or relegate them to the periphery. In his Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790), Immanuel Kant regards trees as 'self-organising' but not as 'alive' – because they lack an essential characteristic of life: desire (which animals possess). In The Phenomenon of Life (1966), Hans Jonas argues that plants don't possess a 'world' because they can't be contrasted with their environments. Thus, while the animal-environment relation is one between a sensing, directed subject and a 'world', the plant-environment relation is between a nonsubject and nonobjects, or as Jonas puts it: 'consists of adjacent matter and impinging forces'.

Kant and Jonas are no exceptions, but exemplify the rule: theoretical accounts of life, of the organism and its relation to the environment, rarely consider plants. This might be because, like Kant, we regard them as somehow lacking, or like Jonas, we identify them with the environment. After all, trees, like all plants, are rooted in the soil at a single location, making them the basic building blocks of an 'environment'. They provide habitats, nourishment and shade for nonhuman and human animals, as well as a multiplicity of microorganisms and other plants. This seems to imply that trees are the 'props' of the animal stage – objects that are largely passive in contrast with the active work of humans and other animals.

The identification of tree with environment can, under some definitions[3], mean that trees are not, strictly speaking, 'organisms'. This is because a key feature of organisms is their distinction from their environments (ie, the fact that they maintain themselves in the face of changes to their environments). Thus, although today we would not claim with Kant that trees are not 'alive', certain definitions of organisms logically imply that trees fundamentally differ from all other living beings.

But is it really the case that trees are simply the 'stage setting' for animal activity? In terms of numbers alone, this cannot be true, and a more apt metaphor would be that animals are the decorations or props on the Earth's complex vegetal life system: more than 80 per cent[4] of live carbon on the Earth resides in plants. Furthermore, alongside humans, trees are the dominant drivers of terrestrial biogeochemical cycles in the Anthropocene, influencing the Earth's environment in ways that no (nonhuman) animal can. And, as recent research has shown[5], trees communicate to influence and transform their environments in ways that challenge our common understanding of both trees and environments.

This recent research, which has inspired a number of literary[6] and artistic works[7] focused on trees,

[1] https://aeon.co/essays/why-forests-and-rivers-are-the-most-potent-health-tonic-around
[2] https://www.jstor.org/stable/4450624?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
[3] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10539-012-9309-3
[4] https://www.pnas.org/content/115/25/6506
[5] https://greystonebooks.com/products/the-hidden-life-of-trees
[6] https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/576914/thus-spoke-the-plant-by-monica-gagliano/
[7] https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1115230/the-overstory/9781784708245.html