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Breathing with Seagrass: Embodied Estrangement and the Emerging Planthroposcene in Finnish Speculative Fiction

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[ABSTRACT BEGINS]

This essay introduces recent speculative novels written by Finnish authors, and discusses the vegetal agency that permeates them. In Johanna Sinisalo’s *The Core of the Sun* and Emmi Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters*, plant life entices, intoxicates, and transforms human bodies and minds. Sinisalo experiments with ideas about the coevolution of plants and humans, and Itäranta explores the significance of plants in the contexts of space colonies and ecosabotage. The essay suggests that the novels gesture toward an emerging *Planthroposcene*.

Anthropologist Natasha Myers has proposed “Planthroposcene” as a modification to Anthropocene, the era of global human impact on the Earth. As an “aspirational episteme”, the Planthroposcene considers plants as allies and teachers, and invites researchers and artists to develop ways of “conspiring” with them. While *Planthroposcene* invites humans to align themselves with plant life in mutually beneficial relationships, contemporary Finnish speculative fiction suggests that such relationships are not fluid extensions of knowledge, but can also be strange, disturbing, and even destructive.

Drawing on the theoretical view that speculative fiction can challenge readers’ habitual patterns of engaging with their lived environments, and thus give rise to unexpected experiences and non-anthropocentric viewpoints, the essay develops the notion of *embodied estrangement*. Discussing ambivalent plant-human-relations demonstrates how the notion of embodied estrangement can contribute to science fiction studies as well as to more-than-human methodologies in literary studies.

[ABSTRACT ENDS]

Philosophical studies on plants have recently started to reject the notion that plants exist “only for human delectation, consumption, or reverie”, and started to promote the view that “plants produce the human and vice versa” (Gibson & Brits 19). In the environmental humanities and posthumanist thought, the “vegetal turn” has produced thinking that takes

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vegetal agency seriously and seek to take plant-human relations beyond utilitarian and aesthetic perspectives (e. g. Marder; Myers “From Edenic”) and given rise to human-plant studies (Ryan). Beginning from the fact that all animal life, humans included, depends on plants – not just for nutrition, but for the air we breathe and the water we drink – such thinkers ask us to pay more attention to the existence and well-being of plant life. Vegetal agency is not just material agency, the ability to shape soils and climate conditions, but cognitive agency: recent research has found that plants explore their environments, actively seek nutrition and water, and respond to outside threats and opportunities (e. g. Trewawas; Baluška & Mancuso; Chamovitz).

Recent works in speculative fiction, such as Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy and Tade Thompson’s *Wormwood* trilogy, are emblematic of a widening interest in dramatizing the agency of non-human organic life. In these works, expressions of vegetal agency complicate inherited epistemologies and bounded ontological categories. Plants are not merely an evocative backdrop or symbols for human life. Rather, plant life is verdant and vital, and co-constitutive of the category of “the human.” (See also Laist; Bishop et al.) Recent works in Finnish speculative fiction share an interest in exploring life in the Planthroposcene, with a specific focus on dramatizing practices in which humans and plants collaborate to build new worlds. In Johanna Sinisalo’s 2016 novel *The Core of the Sun* (*Auringon ydin*) and Emmi Itäranta’s 2022 novel *The Moonday Letters* (*Kuunpäivän kirjeet*), humans cultivate, breed and consume plants, constructing greenhouses and orbital gardens to manage and orient vegetal growth. In turn, plant life entices, intoxicates and transforms human bodies and minds. Key chapters in both novels build on shamanistic spirit journeys. Such world-building serves to convey *more-than-human relationality*, that is, the notion that different beings and things always come to exist in relations with each other – an emergent topic in both posthumanism (e. g. Myers “From Edenic”; Puig de la Bellacasa) and sustainability studies (Jax et al.).

In analyzing these novels, my aim is to consider fictional vegetation from a perspective that stays true to the relationality in material plant-human interactions, taking both human and vegetal agency into account. To achieve this, I draw on the posthumanist work of anthropologist Natasha Myers. For Myers (“From the Anthropocene” 3), the ideology of the Anthropocene hinges on a singular focus on human agency and the consequent reliance on technological fixes to environmental problems: “‘we’ got ourselves into this mess, and ‘we’

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can get ourselves out of it through more of the same (geoengineering, sustainable infrastructures, responsible innovations, etc.)”. What is needed, then, is thinking that both recognizes “designs for the Anthropocene” – practical and technological arrangements that perpetuate the destructive logics that have brought the planet to a state of emergency – and suggests designs that invite us to “conspire”, that is, “breathe together”, with vegetal and other nonhuman agencies (Myers “From Edenic” 120). In Myers’s thinking, such alternative designs work toward the “aspirational episteme” of the *Planthroposcene*. In the following, I will consider how narratives in speculative fiction make more-than-human relationality salient by providing models of both Anthropocenic and Planthroposcenic plant-human relations.

To show how Sinisalo’s and Itäranta’s narratives work on readers, I modify the established SF studies concept of *cognitive estrangement* (Suvin *Metamorphoses*; Spiegel). “Cognition” in cognitive estrangement is understood narrowly in terms of rational, cerebral sense-making. Broadening the concept to include recent notions of embodied cognition can help SF studies to better describe how works of speculative fiction latch onto our affinities for bodily sense-making: how they move and shake us, arouse affects, spatial orientations, and sensory and kinetic impressions¹. I suggest that literary strategies of estrangement that hinge on evoking bodily experiences in readers may be called *embodied cognitive estrangement*, or, in short, *embodied estrangement* (see also Kortekallio *Mutant*). In particular, the notion of embodied estrangement shows us the moments in which processes of bodily sense-making are disrupted: when we, as readers, stumble, stagger, or lose our bearings altogether. Through such lapses in control, moments of embodied estrangement also call to question our sovereignty as “purely” human subjects, and open us to the more-than-human relationality inherent in sense-making – such as “breathing together” with plant life.

In the essay, I suggest that narratives featuring vegetal agency not only offer alternatives to Anthropocenic modes of thought, but furthermore, that the way these works of Finnish speculative fiction take up vegetal agency can contribute to understanding how meaning emerges in encounters between different kinds of agency – animal, vegetal, or technological. That is, how vegetal matter comes to *matter* in the Planthroposcene. As romanticizing depictions of Nature play a vital part in the national(ist) culture of Finland – think of upholding the image of Lapland and North Karelia as sites of pristine wilderness landscapes while those landscapes are, in actuality, largely harnessed by mining and forest

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industries – speculative takes on nonhuman agency and more-than-human entanglements can help disrupt stereotypical notions of the Finnish “relationship to Nature” (see also Samola & Roine). Moreover, their disruptive work also orients attention to issues of gendered power (Sinisalo) and class privilege (Itäranta).

Embodied estrangement in Johanna Sinisalo’s *The Core of the Sun*

Johanna Sinisalo is often mentioned as a key contributor to the “Finnish Weird” movement, which uses fantastic and magical-realist effects to destabilize contemporary realist settings (see e. g. Samola & Roine). In 2000, her novel *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (eng. *Not before Sundown*, 2003; *Troll, A Love Story*, 2004) broke new ground as the first overtly speculative novel to win the nationally prestigious Finlandia award in literature, encouraging even mainstream Finnish authors to adopt non-mimetic styles. (Samola & Roine.)² Sinisalo’s style is thus representative of a wider movement in contemporary Finnish fiction: aimed at both domestic and international audiences, recent works of Finnish fiction often make strategic use of national icons, both evoking them as emblems of Finnish culture and reinterpreting them in contemporary political and environmental contexts. In *The Core of the Sun*, one such icon is the Nordic welfare state, whereas Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters* foregrounds Arctic landscapes, animals, and plants.

Most of Sinisalo’s work involves ecological themes which have been discussed in previous research – *Birdbrain* (2008), just to mention one example, has been interpreted as portraying humans as invasive species (Jylkkä). In *The Core of the Sun*, Sinisalo presents a critical view on Finnish society as an epitome of gender equality, and offers a chilling political satire reminiscent of classic feminist science fiction such as Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The feminist and dystopian aspects of the novel, also in comparison to Atwood, have been extensively studied (e. g. Samola & Roine; Klimková & Boszorád; Samola “From Gilead”). Another central aspect has received less attention: the cultivation and use of consciousness-altering plants (but see Samola “Botanics”, 140).

The Core of the Sun features a dystopian society, which is modeled on contemporary Finland but with an alternative history. In the novel, the fascist, racist and misogynist

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movements of early 20th century Europe have become ruling ideologies, resulting in a “eusistocratic” nation state that practices eugenics and a strict binary separation of gender roles enforced through both medical and societal means. Misogyny has been ruled as natural and desirable, and generations of female bodies have been put through the process of “domestication”, the selective breeding of shapely, docile and intellectually non-threatening subjects.

Parallel to the breeding of pure men and women, the novel speculates on the purposeful breeding of plants, and the chili in particular. Extrapolating on the chili-growing craze of the early 2000’s, Sinisalo imagines a situation in which chili fruits are bred and consumed not for their flavor but for the effects they have on embodied minds: pain, pleasure, and the transformation of consciousness.³ The main character Vanna/Vera is both an atypical female and a capsaicin addict, and her encounters with chilies highlight the potential effects of embodied estrangement.⁴

The Core of the Sun presents a culturally sensitive view on coevolution. Even in the long histories humans share with consciousness-altering plants, the forms of organisms are shaped by cultural and political preferences. Under the strict drug laws of the novel’s health-fascist Finland, chili is secretly bred into a psychoactive drug. One underground cultivator of chilis, whose practice and business the protagonist becomes involved in, explains this coevolutionary view. In nature, the seeds of chili are usually propagated by birds who eat the fruit. It follows that chili aficionados become “a new kind of bird”: “An exploiter, but also a spreader of seed, a means of maintaining the species. It doesn’t matter to the plant whether its seeds are planted in the ground in a bird’s excrement or in a human’s greenhouse. The end result is the same: the species survives and multiplies” (211).

From the assumed perspective of the plant itself, such human uses are secondary: its primary goal is to live long and prosper. Such a perspective resonates with the contextualizing accounts given by nonfiction author Michael Pollan in his popular books on ethnobotany and altered consciousness. For Pollan, the evolutionary success of ‘domesticated’ plants is as much the doing of the plants as of their human ‘cultivators’. In addition, anticipating the Anthropocene discussion, Pollan argues that adaptation to human company has become a requirement for evolutionary success. To use his examples: The panda and the white leopard may become extinct – the apple surely won’t (xxi–xxii).⁵ From a

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coevolutive perspective, the chili does remarkably well in Sinisalo’s eusistocratic state by exploiting the human desire for altering their consciousness.

The experiences of Vanna/Vera are conveyed in synaesthetic language, which provides readers with a wide range of sensory cues. At first, when Vanna/Vera gets her hands on a bowl of habanero-spiked stew, the sensations are fairly relatable for a standard-issue human body. Adding to the literal description of perspiration, the metaphoric language is mainly kinesthetic, with references to impacting forces, heated metal, and fire.

[INDENTED CITATION BEGINS]

“The first hit of habanero shakes me. I’ve already had three or four forkfuls before it starts to come up on me, first in little waves lapping the shore, then, before I know what’s happening, it’s like a roaring tidal wave curling over me.

A little squeaking sound comes out of me as a hot iron starts pressing the inside of my mouth. Every sweat gland in my body starts to ooze simultaneously. Burning drops flow down my spine, my forehead, under my eyes, down my arms, over my crotch, making my panties damp as though I’ve wet myself, and I may actually have wet myself – I hardly would have noticed, because flames are shooting through my digestive tract, hitting me right under my chest like a hatchet.” (113)

[INDENTED CITATION ENDS]

On the next page, however, the properly synaesthetic sensations begin. Habanero is described as having “intense overtones; its heat is shrill, piercing, like a drill on the nerve of a tooth. The flavor of it is yellow, almost white-yellow, flashing on my optic nerve [- -] slashing undertones mixed with unspeakably deep, wonderfully agonizing bass notes” (114). The sensations of heat, pain and flavor are mixed with sensations of sound, color, and light. Later, readers will learn that synaesthesia is not caused by the chili as such, but it is a permanent feature in Vanna/Vera’s neurocognition: even without the chili, she tends to smell in color, and perceive the affective states of others as scents.

Beyond her synaesthetic experiences, Vanna/Vera also experiences change in her affective state: she finds immediate relief from anxiety and depression. The overall change can be considered transformative. Anthropologist Anna L. Tsing (46) has described the

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experience of smelling a matsutake mushroom in terms of “encounter”, as a “sign of the presence of another, to which we are already responding”, after which “we are not quite ourselves any more – or at least the selves we were, but rather ourselves in encounter with another”. In Sinisalo’s novel, tasting chili can be considered an unpredictably transformative encounter: in the midst of the experience and after it, Vanna/Vera is not quite the same as she was before. Going forward, I suggest that neither is the reader of Sinisalo’s text: The embodied estrangement at work has power to temporarily transform the body-in-encounter by disrupting habituated patterns of bodily sense-making – by giving it a whiff of an altered state of consciousness, for example. To better appreciate how such transformation takes place, we can draw on the theory of cognitive estrangement.

In Darko Suvin’s theory, the interaction of “cognition” and “estrangement” – “cognitive estrangement” – is what best distinguishes science fiction as a genre. When considering readerly engagement, however, cognitive estrangement aptly describes the experientiality of many kinds of fictional works, not necessarily restricted to science fiction or speculative fiction. “Cognition”, when understood as “that aspect of SF that prompts us to try and understand, to comprehend, the alien landscape of a given SF book” (Roberts 8), enables the comparison between the empirical and the imaginative world (see also Spiegel 373). Suvin’s understanding of cognition is, however, limited by its assumption of detached rationality (see e.g. Suvin *Metamorphoses* 65, 67–68). Although Suvin’s later work (“On Cognitive”, “Considering”) considers emotion and the fantastic imagination, the way the term centers only the rationalist aspects of cognition obscures the embodied dynamics of reading speculative fiction such as affect, immersion and flow, weird modes of temporality and spatiality, and the aesthetic feel of the text as affects that materialize in the reader’s embodied shifts in nervous, respiratory, pulmonary, and galvanic responses. In light of contemporary research in cognitive studies, such dynamics can and should be conceived as aspects of cognition: the effort of comprehending “alien landscapes” is a thoroughly bodily process. The same can be argued for estrangement.⁶

More specifically, the rationalist bias means that cognitive estrangement is ill-suited to bring to account the experiential moments in which dramatic scenes and stylistic efforts aim to destabilize readers’ notions of empirical worlds by affecting their bodily experience. In the case of Sinisalo’s novel, it only reaches the *idea* of intentionally bred varieties of humans

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and chilis – but not the novel experiential effects that arise in reading when a human-chili enmeshment is evocatively described. In my view, the full appreciation of such innovation requires understanding both cognition and estrangement in terms of embodied experience. In the case of reading about strange encounters between humans and plants, embodied estrangement can destabilize the notion of purely human experience and evoke an embodied sense of more-than-human relationality (see also Kortekallio *Mutant*; “Dancing”).

In the flow of reading, embodied estrangement can be felt as traces, shadows, or impressions of sensory and kinetic experience, that is, aspects of embodied cognition. As the text describes the hot iron pressing the inside of Vanna/Vera’s mouth and flames in her digestive tract, sensory memories of previous encounters with hot irons and flames are activated in readers’ minds. Memories of eating chilis might also be activated, but the effectiveness of the passage does not depend on such memories. Sensory memories of hot irons and flames will vary in nuance, but the basics of the experience of heat and pain are bound to be similar (see e.g. Weik von Mossner 27). This part of the strategic move of embodied estrangement depends on *familiarization*: making something strange seem familiar.

Moving on to the estranging part, the text rides on these sensory memories and associates them with the shrill sound of a drill and the bright color of almost-white yellow. This part of the strategy of embodied estrangement depends on *defamiliarization*: familiar sensations of heat and pain are associated with something surprising to produce a novel quasisensory experience. The success of the strategy depends on the readers’ sensitivity to sensory cues, and perhaps, in this case, also on their tendencies for synaesthetic sensation. If successful, the strategy enriches the imagined sensation of eating habaneros. Moreover, it prepares the reader for stranger deviations from everyday bodily experience.

It turns out that the group of chili cultivators are seeking to breed a variety of chili capable of inducing a transcendent experience. The goal state is explained to readers both in spiritual terms, as “a lost, undiluted communion with nature [. . .] a state that the shamans understood” and in scientific language, as “trance possession [achieved] by irritating the trigeminal cells in the mouth and gut with capsaicin” (Sinisalo 216).⁷ Toward the end of the novel, Vanna/Vera consumes a novel variety of chili christened by the cultivators as “The Core of the Sun”, and experiences the trance possession state on two separate occasions. The experience goes beyond synesthesia, and beyond sensory experience altogether.

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Sinisalo first describes trance possession through sensory phenomena that are at the edge of perception: a white color “on the other side of whiteness; new-fallen snow on the brightest winter day is gray by comparison” and “an impossibly high-pitched tinnitus [. . .] so close to the very edge of perception, that it’s as if the light of a distant star has become sound” (258); and then listing a series of absences: the ending of the whiteness and the sound, the stopping of time, and an absence of heat sensations. Vanna/Vera’s conscious perception exits her physical body, floating above it, and begins to attune to the forms of life outside the house, from birch trees to beetles and gnats. Her perception is momentarily transferred inside a fly, “a darting, precise, persistent little clockwork that sees the world in a pattern of flickering, dizzying points of light” (259). Here, embodied estrangement is used to shift what readers expect human bodies to be capable of – the sensory details invite readers to feel with the protagonist’s embodied experience, and move with her to embodied experiences that might seem unlikely, such as the cessation of sensory perception or the experiential feel of being a fly. The estranging impact of such experientiality, as part of the whole of Sinisalo’s world-building effort, cannot be explained through the traditional notion of cognitive estrangement.

On her second out-of-body experience, Vanna/Vera “rides” several animals intentionally, to find her long-lost sister from the other side of the country. This time, the experience is couched entirely in the context of shamanist spirit travel, but with scientific rationalizations and an excessively human-centered overtone.⁸ The traveling is characterized in terms of dominant, controlling power over other beings, as penetration of the other’s consciousness and mounting a ride. Nonhuman life, from the chili to the mounted animals, is thus presented as instrumental to human purposes. In the description of the first experience, readers get a glimpse of ecological diversity and nonhuman life existing outside human control, but this sketch of ecological appreciation collapses under the ultimate domination by human agency.

The moral position of the novel remains ambiguous: while Vanna/Vera’s perspective is used to provide explicit critique of asymmetrical power relations (state/subject, man/woman), the power she wields over other animals differs from such relations only in degree, not in kind. While the chili is initially introduced as an actor capable of using humans to its own purposes, the climax of the novel renders it into an instrumental device. The novel

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can thus be claimed to present and perpetuate an anthropocenic logic of human-centered domination, a ‘design for the Anthropocene’ – rather than Myers’ “conspiracy with plants”. Embodied estrangement takes readers to posthuman directions, but does not provide an experiential feel of plant-human relationality.

Planthroposcenic decolonization in Emmi Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters*

In Emmi Itäranta’s third novel *The Moonday Letters*, the affluent classes of humanity have left the Earth behind and colonized the solar system. The dystopian story is focalized by Lumi Salo, an Earth-born shamanistic healer. With the lyrical language and contemplative style are familiar from Itäranta’s first novel *Memory of Water*⁹, the narrative lays out ethical challenges central to the Anthropocene, such as class privilege and colonialism. Itäranta’s scope of critique extends beyond the Finnish context, to touch on pressure points relevant to all nations in the Global North. As in Sinisalo’s *The Core of the Sun*, shamanism is intertwined with vegetal agency and human cognition through explanations drawing on plant ecology and ethnobotany. Unlike in Sinisalo, in *The Moonday Letters* the shamanist episode serves to decentralize human agency. Moreover, Itäranta takes a step to the direction only gestured by Sinisalo: using ecosabotage to disrupt the colonial and Anthropocene structures of power that support the exploitation of nonhuman beings.

Itäranta’s worldbuilding mirrors the existing eco-colonial structures of the real world, where the “green infrastructures” of affluent societies are based on the natural resources and labor of colonized regions (see Myers “From Edenic”). Although, Itäranta resists a human-exclusive vision of space colonization. Human well-being is dependent on vegetal well-being but vegetal well-being is incorporated into structural violence inherent in designs for the Anthropocene. In *The Moonday Letters* entire ecosystems aboard orbital cities and Mars colonies are described in detail. The orbital cities, in particular, seem to consist almost entirely of gardens: outdoor plantations and forests, greenhouse domes in space ports, rooftop gardens with corn, beans, and lavender, vertical gardens, and window sill herb gardens in every kitchen. These verdant descriptions establish a stark contrast between the affluent colonies with ecologically and economically collapsed regions on Earth and the Moon. As

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capital has exited Earth and a rise in sea level has redrawn or erased the contours of nation states, many places on Earth – including Lapland – are repurposed as nostalgic holiday resort “islands” for the exploitative use of the extraterrestrial elite.

Escaping the hardships of Earth-bound life, Lumi builds a colonial home on one of the orbital cities, Fuxi. On this vulnerable “shard of metal” (185), Lumi and her Mars-born spouse Sol adopt a house cat and plant a rose quince on the balcony¹⁰. For Lumi, the pines and birches of the station’s forest bring to mind her original Lappish home.¹¹ When a fungal infection rapidly destroys all vegetal life on Fuxi, and the city’s human citizens have to be evacuated, Lumi loses the comfort bought with colonial power. While this event is narrated in a matter-of-fact, affectless language, later on Lumi dreams about a fungus that destroys her house and garden. The fungus is accompanied by shudders in the earth, felt in Lumi’s body: “My feet slip on the damp mat of decomposing leaves, as I try to gain my balance. The quake slithers into my body through the soles of my feet and flows into each limb, cuts my heart in half and sends stabs of pain behind my eyes.” (215).

Metaphoric and kinetic language is used to evoke the loss of one’s familiar ground and the associated sense of security. The fungus, an unknown and risky factor, enters the home garden, causing decay on dear plants and causing unpleasant sensations of dampness, darkness and stickiness. The quake threatens not just the stability of the house, but the integrity of the lived body – in terms of one’s embodied and extended mind, these two are intertwined. The devious “slithering” is followed by sharp imagery that cuts and stabs the body from inside. In this way, the narrative strategy of embodied estrangement makes the theme of losing one’s home relevant on the level of embodied experience. In readerly experience, the destabilizing bodily feelings change the atmosphere of the narrative and prime expectations for more serious turmoil.

The following disaster, now at the levels of species and planets, is an act of ecosabotage on Earth. In the event, the spores of the same bioengineered fungus that caused the infection on Fuxi are released to the planet’s oceans. Crucially for the Earth-centered ethics of the novel, no life on Earth is destroyed – like the invasive species that crossed continental borders with colonial settlers, the fungus is only harmful in certain ecosystems, not all. In Earth’s marine ecosystems, it serves as a symbiont for seagrasses, aiding their growth and thus re-oxidizing the oceans – eventually providing animals with more oxygen to

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breathe. In ocean-less extraterrestrial colonies like Fuxi or Mars, it would act as a parasite on vegetation. The saboteurs hope that when the whole planet is placed under quarantine in an effort to contain this risk of parasitical behavior, Terran ecosystems and societies will have enough time to recover from Anthropocenic exploitation. The *disaster* in the event lies in the fact that the space colonists’ attachment to their original home and source of resources, Earth, is severed for the rest of their years. For the saboteurs, this severance ensures the survival of Earth in the long run. Appreciating this strategy requires a change of perspective from individualist and anthropocentric to the level of multispecies well-being.

Throughout the novel, Lumi’s shamanistic journeys are depicted as professional means of healing other humans, including herself. On her journeys, Lumi is accompanied by nonhuman helpers, including a “soul-animal”, lynx. Habitually, Lumi uses the lynx in instrumental and even violent ways comparable to those in Sinisalo’s *The Core of the Sun*, discussed above. Toward the end, however, this habit changes. After causing serious wounds to the lynx, Lumi regrets and gives up her control over the animal, which leads her to finding previously undiscovered aspects in the spirit journey. As her consciousness is enmeshed with lynx senses and abilities, she asks the animal to take her wherever she wants to go. “The animal’s eyesight lives within my sight, and I live under her skin; she lends me her senses and the strength of her muscles, and I don’t want to return to my own skin again” (339). Here, embodied estrangement is used to mesh a human perspective with a nonhuman one. Importantly, the human perspective is not lost in the enmeshment, and the novel does not participate in direct anthropomorphization of nonhuman experience; rather, Lumi interprets lynx senses through her human perception, which is conveyed through the image of living within the body of the other, and in other careful choices of vocabulary.

Embodied estrangement also invites readers to joyfully breathe with plants. For Myers, “conspiracy” stands for “breathing together”. In *The Moonday Letters*, the main goal of the saboteurs’ conspiracy is just that – finding and releasing a fungus that would help plants breathe. The success of this endeavor is associated with the relief of the protagonist and, through the narrative device of the spirit journey, the relief of the seagrass: the easing of their breath and the relaxing of their supporting structures.

[INDENTED CITATION BEGINS]

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“The spores thicken into swarms around the seagrass, they grow a layer of fungus deep in the mud on the grassroots, nourishing the grass. And the grasses open, they sigh, for the first time in a hundred years they breathe as they are meant to breathe. The fungi rejoice as the grasses feed them, and the cells of the grasses divide, multiply, they grow grow grow” (339–340)

[INDENTED CITATION ENDS]

The description of fungal and vegetal breathing emphasizes the corporeal intertwining of their metabolisms: what the plants breathe out, the fungi breathe in. This intertwining is crucial for the survival of animals, humans included. Through decentering her human-centered control, Lumi is able to affectively understand the vigor and joy of animal, fungal, and plant life. Contra Sinisalo’s *The Core of the Sun*, spirit travel is not depicted as a super power, which affords control over other living beings with little or no cost to anybody. Rather, in *The Moonday Letters*, every action has inevitable ethical and ecological consequences.

Conclusion

The Core of the Sun and *The Moonday Letters* stage plant-human relations in ways that can open avenues to planthropocenic thinking. As they describe encounters and enmeshments between human and vegetal agency, they render salient more-than-human relationality within ecological assemblages – including strange and destructive aspects of such relations.

Sinisalo’s combination of the expressive repertoires of scientific explanation and sensory description lends the novel a corporeal credibility. Fantastic as they are, the depictions of synaesthetic bodily experience serve to guide the reader from the *recognition* of relatively common everyday sensations, such as the feel of a spicy sauce on one’s tongue, toward extrapolation of such sensations. The imagination involved in such an extrapolative exercise is not rationally detached but corporeal and affective: the design of the text invites the readers to feel the perhaps-unfathomable sensations of pain and pleasure. Moreover, as readers tag along for the spirit journey in the style of stream-of-consciousness, they are

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invited to enact experiences that draw on their capability for sensory experience, yet transcend it.

Itäranta provides a complex view on the ecological and societal interdependencies involved in designs for the Anthropocene. Her middle-class protagonist offers an affective viewpoint to eco-colonial privilege. Crucially, this viewpoint is open to transformative encounters with nonhuman life, and to renouncing anthropocenic control. In *The Moonday Letters*, restoring Earth as a home for humans and other species necessarily involves giving up the personal comforts and attachments accumulated through exploitative Anthropocene practices. While this may seem like a harsh bargain, we may call on Glenn Albrecht’s (55) ecophile vision of “finding an earthly ‘home’ in the connection with living things and life processes on this planet” through acts of biocultural restoration. As it evokes the joy of breathing with seagrass, *The Moonday Letters* offers a positive vision of conspiring with vegetal life.

The material and bodily aspects of engaging with speculative fiction are increasingly recognized as important modes of sense-making (see Vint; Shaviro; Kortekallio “Dancing”). One way to develop this understanding is to adapt cognitive estrangement to the paradigms of embodied cognition and and new materialism. I propose that the concept of embodied estrangement can help to focus the analysis of speculative fiction on the material and affective aspects of texts that estrange and reorient the readers’ experience of empirical reality. Thinking in terms of embodied estrangement allows us to reflect on specific moments of strange bodily feelings experienced while reading, and discuss how they participate in the interpretive processes of reading speculative fiction.

Notes

¹ Following Marek Oziewicz and others, this essay regards “speculative fiction” as a “fuzzy set super category” and a cultural field that houses all non-mimetic genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and weird fiction. While building on Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement (which can be useful in the analysis of fictional works regardless of their genre) the essay does not endorse his particular definition of science fiction.

² In 2004, *Not before Sundown* also won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award.

³ In her Afterword, Sinisalo also thanks Jukka “Fatalii” Kilpinen (perhaps the most prominent chili aficionado in Finland) for his assistance with the book. For Kilpinen’s extensive research on chili cultivation, see <https://www.fatalii.net>.

⁴ The duality of the character name stems from state control. Vera is the original name given by the protagonist’s parents, Vanna the name given by state officials. In public spaces, Vanna is the name to use; in

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private, the protagonist refers to herself as Vera. The novel’s section titles that indicate the protagonist’s perspective use the form “Vanna/Vera”. For a longer analysis of the names, see Samola “From Gilead”.

⁵ While we may think of coevolution as a broad context for plant-human relations, we might also ask what it means for the specific relations of humans and particular plant species, such as the chili, or the potato, which has shaped European and American history (see Pollan).

⁶ For existing work on the embodied aspects of SF sense-making, see e.g. Vint, Shaviro, Weik von Mossner, and Caracciolo. The notion of embodied estrangement would not be possible without this previous work, and I connect to it in more detail in e.g. Kortekallio *Mutant*; “Dancing”.

⁷ Such a synthesis of neurobiology and animistic tradition is a trademark of Sinisalo’s, known from other novels such as *Not before Sundown* and *Birdbrain* (see Samola & Roine; Jylkkä).

⁸ Descriptions of journeys to the Otherworld are common in Sinisalo’s oeuvre (see Samola & Roine 192).

⁹ *Memory of Water* has been translated into at least 20 languages and extensively studied in the contexts of climate fiction and young adult fiction (see e.g. Guanio-Uluru; Leppänen). Itäranta writes her novels both in Finnish and in English, more or less simultaneously (on the process and its implications for transnational literature, see Leppänen 428–429).

¹⁰ The rose quince (*Chaenomeles japonica*) bears the symbolism of old Terran wealth: Sol’s ancestors have brought the original parent plant from Earth, for a significant cost. In the novel’s world, the species is almost extinct. It also comes to symbolize Lumi and Sol’s shared home, perhaps also their relationship. (186 *et passim*. See also Guanio-Uluru 426.)

¹¹ Birch (*Betula* family) symbolizes the Finnish home of the protagonist, as well as her memories of home. Birches grow in the mental spaces she constructs: the imaginary house she shares with Sol (229), and the sites where her spirit journeys take her (237; 288; 340). In Finnish rural tradition, birches are used for firewood, sap, bathing, and decoration. The tree represents cleanliness, warmth, and care.

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