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"Her Flowers are Her Children": Cultivating Victorian Houseplant Motherhood in Colonial Archives

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Abstract

This essay introduces the figure of Victorian "plant mother" whose houseplant amities provide an alternative model of motherhood within nineteenth-century colonial archives. I argue that compiling instances of her dispersed presences across archival documents reveals a flexible avatar of motherhood who restores maternity's embodied and emotional dimensions. Not simply an agent of colonialism, the plant mother and her plants provide moments of transformation that coax out of colonial archival structures more inclusive models of domesticity, family, and belonging. To access these moments, I build a framework for interpreting nineteenth-century archival materials that braids feminist and critical plant studies perspectives that share commitments to expanding understandings of archives in their theoretical and material forms. This essay reconstructs the lives of Victorian plant mothers from plant births to deaths. Through these archival reconstructions, I insist that Victorian houseplant mothers show us how to locate nodes of loving resistance within colonial archival structures.

Keywords: *Critical plant studies; feminist studies; archives; Victorian period; horticulture*

The May 1887 installment of Eben Rexford's "Flowers and Houseplants" column for *Ladies' Home Journal* hosts Annie C. Brown's advice on caring for "Chinese Lilies." To validate her expertise, Brown provides some personal background: "I am a middle-aged woman with only one child, a daughter, who is grown up, so all my spare time is given to my flowers. They are to me as children." Her garden family is a vast global archive of South African Pelargoniums, Central American Begonias, and Californian cacti. As well as a busy plant mother, Brown was a generous one, as she offers interested readers some of her Chinese Lily bulbs. Brown's archival trace formulates a paradoxical model of motherhood steeped in control and love, which highlights the sometimes-vexed process of feminist archival recovery projects. On one hand, focus on Brown's horticultural cultivations involving difficult-to-manage imported plants rehearses a fantasy of colonial archival control that solidifies narratives of white women who leveraged their roles as mothers to sustain the strength of the world's empires. However, Annie Brown's undeniable vegetal affinities enact new models of belonging; by sharing her bulbs, Brown provides evidence for how nineteenth-century archival materials generated an archetype for plant-human families unfettered by spatial and species boundaries.

Plant love is a global phenomenon, as seen, for instance, in the multispecies kinship networks that define parenthood as "degrees of affinity" instead of "consanguinity" within indigenous cultures of Amazonia (Maizza 2017, 206). This article focuses on how Victorians co-opted

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plant parenthood as a uniquely British phenomenon, evidence of "a nation's feeling deep and true" according to Frances Bardswell, to posit the multi-species family as an organizing narrative of colonial archives (1903, 1). Archives were indispensable tools of empire-building throughout the Victorian Era. Not simply neutral repositories of information, the empire's legions of archives coalesced to form a unified fiction of imperial control. Thomas Richards refers to this process as a "literary fantasy" of "not what the British empire was but as it was imagined to have been" (1993, 8). Archives told stories about and for empire. A common "character" found across nineteenth-century colonial archives is the mother figure who, when marshaled as an agent of empire, discursively obfuscated violent colonial dispossessions and promoted exclusionary models of citizenship under the guise of maternal love. Reading with the dominant archival grain, we risk naturalizing this as the dominant, and only, figuration of motherhood. However, recruiting feminist and critical plant studies approaches to archival materials surfaces an alternative formation of motherhood populating the colonial archival landscape: the plant mom who discards the imperial family to "feed, house, and protect" imported plants "like children" (Maynard, 1889, 4).

My contribution to this special issue, "Labors of Love and Loss: Radical Acts of Human, Plant, and Nonhuman Mothering," interprets its theme through the nineteenth-century plant mother. To familiarize the new world of indoor horticulture, nineteenth-century plant lovers replicated nuclear family structures that cast humans as mothers and fathers, and plants as children—a trend that spanned the U.S. and England (Veder 2007; Garascia 2022). Reading plant parenthood through its relationship to archives and archiving, I argue that compiling instances of the plant mom's dispersed presences across a broad suite of archival documents reveals a flexible avatar who restores maternity's embodied and emotional dimensions. Not simply an agent of colonialism, the plant mother and her interspecies amities coax out of colonial archival structures more expansive and inclusive models of domesticity, family, and belonging. To access these moments, I build a framework for interpreting nineteenth-century archival materials that braids feminist and critical plant studies perspectives that share commitments to expanding understandings of archives in their theoretical and material forms. This essay reconstructs the lives of Victorian plant mothers by following them through a speculative timeline. I open with the shared archival qualities of domestic spaces and plants by highlighting moments when women brought new plants indoors to reconfigure home and empire physically and figuratively. I then shift focus to plant motherhood's reshaping of anthropocentric archival bodies through the long lives she spends with her plants. This essay then concludes with a brief consideration of how plant deaths constitute an expression of archival grief work. Through these archival reconstructions, I insist that Victorian houseplant mothers show us how to locate nodes of loving resistance within colonial archival structures

Locating the Mother in Victorian Archives

Throughout the nineteenth century, England engaged in a far-reaching series of colonial projects that staked political, economic, and cultural claims across Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Africa, and South and Central America. To secure its grasp on distant lands, the British empire's imperial centers engineered labyrinthine networks of information production and management retroactively called colonial archives. Documents of the British empire generated by the Colonial Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are now largely housed within a central repository, the National Archives UK at Kew. The typical genres a researcher might encounter include gazettes (official

government newspapers), blue books (statistics collections), despatches (formal written communications), and letters (semi-formal written communications) (Banton, 2020, xxi-xxii). Such "official" bodies of documentation, however, prove vexing for feminist approaches to the history of empire, since women's direct words were rarely recorded. While not completely missing, historical records of women are "fragments," "scattered across archives," and often located by "serendipity" (Datta 2021, 20; Rose 2005, 237; Gerson 2006, 13). Feminist archival recovery projects, then, require broader definitions of archives and archival materials, as well as methodologies—both of which this essay advances through its feminist and critical plant studies perspectives.

Feminist approaches to colonial archives adopt what Antoine Burton calls "an elastic view of what counts as an archive," stretching the traditional purview of administrative records to include documents such as family letters, diaries, oral histories, photographs, and periodicals (2004, 289). As an expression of its feminist alliances, I eschew the "official" documents of the empire for a more eclectic informal archive comprised of home illustrations, horticultural manuals, regional flora, and special-interest periodicals, all of which accentuate women authors and subjects. This body of documentation strategically elucidates how British popular horticultural productions both solidify pre-existing colonial discourses of British maternity and formulate new paradigms. Notably, these materials all fall under the realm of non-fictional, but they nonetheless generated fictions that sustained the empire's health.

Archival materials have been such mainstays of social sciences and humanities scholarship that our relationships with them tend to go unremarked. Historian Ann Laura Stoler proposes a switch from "archives as source" to "archive as subject" that views colonial archives as "epistemological experiments" and "cross-sections of contested knowledge" (2002, 89). One way to access archives-as-subjects is by investigating how they produce colonial discourses, a term that encompasses a microcosmic focus on "textual representations, verbal or visual," and a macrocosmic one on general ways of "talking about, representing … colonial peoples" (Hall, 2004, 50). Much like literary texts, archival documents, too, rely on rhetorical patterns, tropes, and figures of speech to construct visions of archived peoples and places that work in service of securing the perspectives of dominant cultural authorities. Attention to the specificities of language within archival documents divulges "more about colonial officials than it does about the people living in those places" (Downs, 2017, 174). When gathered, these verbal and visual textual representations contribute to the overarching cultural narratives through which Victorian living was consciously and unconsciously organized. The tropological catalogue of colonial archives—the different cast of "characters" we encounter—is as vast as the archives themselves, so for this essay, I isolate one figure, the mother.

Rather than an elsewhere project, imperialism was essential to nineteenth-century modernity in England, providing the ideological contours of race, gender, and labor in the metropole. If the imperialist agenda for men was to explore and discover, for women, as Catherine Hall demarcates, it was "to reproduce," to bear children," and to "make families and households" (2004, 47). Anne McClintock zeroes in the spatial dimensions subtending tropes of colonial maternity. Defined as both "space (a geographic and architectural alignment) and a social relation to power," domesticity was a key component of British imperial identity, and consequently, the home metamorphosed into a space for producing and "display[ing] of imperial spectacle" (1995, 36). Moving beyond the metaphorical confines her home in England, the mother-figure was also portable, as scholars like Lisa Chilton and Adele Perry

argue that their presences in colonial territories were discursively figured as "necessary civilizing influence[s]" (2001, 3). Pursuing a more conceptual approach, Jessie Reeder identifies "the nuclear family and progress as "the two master narratives" that structured the nineteenth-century experience (2020, 14). Textual representations of the colonial mother in archival materials, I argue, coordinate and give particular shape to these overarching cultural narratives. For example, Queen Victoria was *the* mother. The preface to the 1858 Bengali-language play, *Nil Darpan,* dubbed Queen Victoria "mother of the people" who takes India's subjects as her "children … on her own lap to nourish them" (qtd. In Bhatia, 2004, 25). Similarly, a death-bed biography of Queen Victoria eulogizes her as "a woman, in the first place; in the second, as a ruler" (Coulter and Cooper, 1901, 16). The familial relations thus mapped out implicitly delimit the imperial family as a human one; however, these imbricated discourses of domesticity and imperialism also extend notions of familial affiliation to women and non-human organisms, which began to take shape through the growing sciences of botany and horticulture.

Building Archival Dialogues with Victorian Plants

Victorian plant sciences initiated the growth of a branch of nineteenth-century colonial archival production dedicated to "cataloguing and exploiting" the empire's vegetal wealth (Endersby, 2008, 34). These practices sapped the vitality out of vegetal life by transforming the world's varied flora into herbaria, which are albums of dried plant specimens named and ordered into detailed taxonomic systems, and vast collections of botanical illustrations (Bleichmar, 2012, 72). Beyond institutional archiving, the popular botanical and horticultural press churned out textual proxies of plants in the form of growing manuals, seed catalogues, specialty periodicals, and regional flora. While such archival bodies were grounded in dried specimens or textual reproductions of plants, formal and informal collecting cultures of living plants were just as ubiquitous.

Throughout the nineteenth-century, horticulture had agricultural, medicinal, and ornamental applications that spanned class affiliations, which Charles Dickens summed up in an 1852 speech to the Gardeners' Benevolent Institution: "The love of gardening is associated with all conditions of men, and all periods of time" from the "scholar and statesmen" to the "prisoner … in his lonely cell" (Dickens 1884, 136-7). I focus on the companionate relationships blooming from ornamental plant collecting cultures centered on middle-class consumers who happily suffered from "Fern Fever," "Tulip Mania," and "Orchidelirium." By 1839, Keith Thomas estimates that nearly 18,000 imported varieties of plants resided in England (Thomas, 1991, 226). To replicate the balmy climes of these imported plants, gardening need to move indoors. On the larger scales of botanical gardens and professional nurseries, imported indoor plants were cultivated in vast greenhouses, which were triumphs of Victorian glass-and-iron architecture. Relocating plants to homes was trickier, since the average, middle-class residence simply did not have enough space or funds for fully fledged conservatories or glasshouses. Out of this conundrum grew "indoor gardening," which focused on a plant-centered lifestyle in which humans could "live contentedly" alongside plants in "ordinary sitting rooms" (*West London Observer,* 1890). While Victorian plant sciences initially surface as prolonged exercises in imperialist management of the more-than-human world by taking plants as archivable subjects, indoor gardening presents opportunities for exploring how historical horticultures established human-plant interrelations.

The scholarly turn to the "more-than-human" provides an inlet for theoretically contextualizing Victorian horticultures. Donna Haraway's notion of "companion species" provides a node for this article's feminist and ecocritical perspectives: Haraway views companion species, "the joint lives" of humans and nonhumans "bonded in significance otherness," as a mode of feminist thinking that teaches us "how to be accountable and love less violently" (Haraway, 2003 16; 7). Addressing plant-human relations specifically, I enlist critical plant studies, an interdisciplinary field including philosophy, literature, fine arts, and sciences, that underscores how plants foundationally shape our lives and thought systems. This entails reframing critical conversations to establish dialogues "with plants" rather than produce studies "about plants" (Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira 2015, x). In its call to suture "textual work with plant-based themes" and "actual, living flora," critical plant studies help develop archival reading methods that unite textual and vegetal materialities to address more fully how plants potentially produce their own archival bodies and orders of knowledge alongside human ones.

Vegetally-inclined anthropologists are generatively decentering their discipline's Anthropos by considering more-than-human modes of representation, including the semiotic capacities of Amazonian forests and the natural symbolism of trees (Kohn 2013; Rival 2020). I extend these storytelling capacities of the more-than-human world to archival materials, and though critical plant studies scholars have not yet explicitly taken up the question of the archives, their characterizations of plants tacitly recognize vegetal archival capacities. In the spirit of Stoler's shift from "archive-as-source" to "archive-as-subject," Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira argue that we reframe our understanding of plants from "passive organisms" to "information-processing organisms with complex communication strategies" (2017, xii). If plants do form their own information production and management systems, this provokes questions about how and what plants archive. Patricia Vieira's notion of "phytographia," or plant writing, describes encounters between plants' inscription in the world and textual evidence of those inscriptions where "plants could share their stories" mediated by human authors (2017, 215). Beyond their own lives, plants also index those of their surrounding environs, as Jeffrey Nealon describes in *Plant Theory* (2015): plants possess "a certain kind of language—they share information concerning soil conditions and the presence of predators" (12). By identifying these capabilities, Nealon posits profound plant-human interconnectivities: "Give this series of revelations it becomes even harder to draw the lines among human, animal, and vegetable life" (12). To illuminate the plant-human amities at the heart of Victorian horticulture, this essay joins feminist and critical plant studies approaches to archival materials to characterize women and plants as co-creators of colonial archival discourses and spaces grounded in their entwined embodied and emotional experiences. Subsequent sections highlight points of intersection between these relatively new theoretical interlocutors to produce an interpretative framework for reading colonial archival materials. This lens does not necessarily obliterate the colonial archival bedrock, but rather teases out overlooked instances of loving resistance in the form of the Victorian plant mother and her children that have taken root within it.

Archiving Space

'LL teach thee miracles! Walk on this heath,
And say to the neglected flower, "Look up,
And be thou beautiful!" If thou hast faith,
It will obey thy word.

Illustration for CH. 2 of Edward Sprague Rand, *The Window Gardener* (1872)
Library of Congress.

An illustration of a cozy domestic scene punctuates Edward Sprague Rand's *The Window Gardener* (1872). Including a potted camellia sitting on a table with its waxy leaves taking up residence on a nearby chair and a pothos climbing up the parlor's walls with its serpentine vines twining a window's arches, this home is an informal colonial archive of imported plants. Love suffuses this tableau of colonialist world-making as the woman outstretches her hand with motherly affection. The accompanying poem adopts a god-like voice instructing the woman to assume a maternal role for the "neglected flower." In return, God promises plant compliance, subtly situating the plant as the obedient child. The short excerpt, combined with the indoor tableau, provides viewers with a glimpse into how traditionally feminine discourses

and images of love, domesticity, and faith entwine to carry subtly colonialist messages of control. Beginning with this surreptitious glance into the private lives of plants and women, this section introduces the ways that growing indoor gardens created more-than-human archival spaces that reshaped domesticity environmentally and emotionally

In *Archive Fever* (1995), Jacques Derrida locates the origin of the archive within the home, as denoted by its root *arkheion:* the archive "is initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates" who represented the "right to make and represent the law" (2). Inspired by the French Revolutions' quest for democratic access to knowledge, the rise of modern archival theory and practice in the eighteenth-century cast aside the domestic and relocated archival collections to public spaces. Leopold von Ranke's brand of modern, source-based history in the nineteenth-century furthered severed archives from the home; as "spaces reserved mostly for men," archival repositories were indispensable in molding the professional, middle-class, male scholar (Smith, 1995, 1152). Language of masculine, imperialist conquest permeates the accounts of nineteenth-century historians. Von Ranke compares the researcher to "a traveler who has roamed over even the less known heights and valleys" and archival research to a source of virility that revives "the courage" (1845, 10; 1849, ix).

Feminist scholarship sutures this divide by returning to the home as an archival space, and in doing so, extending traditional definitions of colonial archival to posit that private spaces proffer political histories. Betty Joseph points to staged domestic scenes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels as spaces of feminist archival polyvocality that "memorialize" the lives of people not heard through "official or public archives" (2004, 12). One way to access the domestic archive is through the infrastructural features of the home itself. Focusing on women writers in late-colonial India, Antoinette Burton characterizes the home itself as a space of women's "historiographical opportunity" that uses "domestic architecture, its symbolic meanings and its material realities" as archival sources (Burton, 2003, 4). Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer's "femmage" articulates a feminist archival practice steeped in traditionally domestic activities like "sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking" committed to "document[ing] our culture, redressing our trivialization, and adding our information to the recorded male facts" (1977, 67). To this list, I would like to add plant care.

A leading premise of critical plants studies dictates that plants chronicle their worlds through their lived relation to space, as philosopher Michael Marder explicates: "living beings express themselves in spatial configurations and along their lifetime, in conformity with the seasons and the places they inhabit" (2014, 162). This ascribes an archival quality to plants as their morphologies, their physical forms, supply evidence of their continuous engagement with their spaces: "Living attention to the location of growth is inscribed into the spatial patterns of vegetal bodies: more branches on the sunnier side of the tree, less roots if a plant grows in close proximity to another of the same species, and so forth" (Marder, 159). To make space for the vegetal world, physically and figuratively, in turn entails a "reorganization of our lives, our routines, our psychic space around them" (Marder, 119). As living beings, plants harbor energies that order and reorder the domestic archive's cozy arrangements. The experiences of the Victorian indoor plant grower anticipate my feminist-plant theoretical imbrications by inciting physical, environmental, and emotional changes to the home.

Gardening uncovers the otherwise-unseen mechanics of empire entangling domesticity and exploration. Imported plants in homes produced imperial seepages. One detractor proclaims that living among houseplants was like dwelling in "a steaming hothouse, a Turkish bath" which is "hardly the place anyone would select by preference to take pleasure in" (*Field,* 1882). This comparison taps into a longstanding British perspective of the Turkish bath an exotic, sexualized, and "ambiguous" space that conflated public and private spheres (Potvin, 2005, 320). To neutralize this threat, indoor gardening sympathizers appealed to imperialist narratives of refinement and control. Transforming drawing rooms into miniature maps of the world, plant collecting had a civilizing mission to render wild biota into ornamental and instructive specimens: "The influence of the graceful palm in the hall, the fascinating verdure of ferns from many different countries in the drawing-room, and flowers, from the orchids of the uplands of Mexico to the tiny bulbs of Europe, in your Lilliputian room-conservatory, is surely more eloquent than … any book teachings" (*Field,* 1867). Although this description from the *Field's* "Garden" column tames the vegetal world by converting the plants into collectibles, chaos pervades. Plants stuffed in every corner of the home buck geographic boundaries to create their own imagined ecosystems and potentially take human occupants under siege, much like the tiny Lilliputians did to the beleaguered Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's famed imperial satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

For gardener extraordinaire Shirley Hibberd, houseplants were synonymous with desirable femininity, as he maintains that "the growth of flowers" externalizes desirable wifely character (1855, 88). In practice, houseplant care loosened women from this restrictive theoretical assertion by allowing them to reconsider the maternal expectations materialized through their domestic spaces. Elizabeth Coggin Womack and Lindsay Wells demonstrate how representations of indoor gardening in the periodical press revised the spatial dynamics of domesticity, whether women were attempting to "reconcile [vegetal] rhythms with the middle class home" or grappling with "sharing one's immediate environment with vegetal beings" (Womack, 2018, 273; Wells, 2021, 2). Plant mothers welcomed the spatial mayhem of indoor garden, which, in turn, carved out space for them to experiment with different modes of public maternity. For seaweed enthusiast Margaret Gatty, literal rearrangements fostered figurative ones in mother-daughter relations. To foster marine plants at home, Gatty acknowledges that "some little contrivance is necessary … to avoid annoying other people and injuring furniture" (1863, xxi). According to Gatty's daughter, Juliana Horatia Ewing, wet carpet was the least of the challenges brought by plant-life. In a satirical ode to her mother "At Home and at Sea—a Ballad," she designates plant collecting as a pastime that dismantles the rhythms of domesticity: "O Gattys! Go and call your mother home / at least in time for tea! / The breakfast, lunch, and dinner go and come" (qtd. In Sheffield, 2013, 2-4). Ewing's snarky poem aside, plant collecting and writing was the backbone for their mother-daughter intimacies, as well as a form of public mothering for England's youth. Margaret, Juliana, and Horatia Katherine Gatty co-edited *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, a children's periodical full of horticultural parables and advice teaching youngsters how "to collect and care for the natural world" (Talairach, 2021, 127). The physical concessions that Gatty made for her marine plants at home then rippled outward into a public model of maternity founded on collaborative knowledge dissemination.

When women brought home baby plants, these new family arrangements initially reaffirmed dominant tropes of British colonial maternity. Bodied forth through the British mother, colonial assimilation melts into a multitextured expression of love, care, control, and psychic

violence. Emma Marwedel characterizes imported plants as displaced colonial subjects who "bear long journeys" to relocate to England (1889, 281). The seedlings are completely dependent on the purported benevolence of British caretakers who, if they are "kind" enough, will ensure that the little folks are "fed on the way" (281). Marwedel frames the process of acclimatizing plants to new domestic environs as a primarily emotional, then embodied one: "Plants whose home is in Africa … are frequently homesick for their own hot native land, and so are a little weaker and less beautiful at home" (281). The plants approximate the ideal colonial subject: alluring in their physical difference yet docile enough not to threaten the cultural purchase of white, middle-class Britishness. The vignette of helpless baby plants longing for a kind mama reads as an uncomfortably cute version of forced colonial migration and acculturation. By exaggerating the role of love in cultivating plants, Mardewel's lesson in imperial horticulture taps into what Robin Veder terms the "sentimental pastoralism" of gardening materials that "depict unpaid domestic activities, particularly those performed by women, as natural and effortless." (2007, 22). Marwedel's commentary implicitly weaponizes the folksy charm of mother-child plant relations not to promote altruistic cross-species benevolence but to reify the position of the British mother as the guardian of the male imperial body to inoculate it from threats of imported plants.

As Veder wonderfully documents how horticultural materials render domestic activity effortless, I'd like to introduce ones tackling maternal labors, which reveal conflicting itineraries that revise mother-child relations and perceived needs. Some writings imposed unrealistic paradigms of maternity founded on unending care, as Amy Woods "snappishly" reminds readers that their "shriveled palms" are "children—needing to be fed and tended with unvarying regularity" (*Mothers' Companion* 1896). But not all plant infants were helpless. Seedlings, as Lizzie Hilllhouse describes in *House Plants and How to Succeed with Them* (1897), might arrive with their own emotional and physical trajectories independent of the doting mother: "How cautiously it peeps through the edges of its protecting shell! With a sly look around, suddenly throws aside all timidity; saucily erects its head, boldly proclaiming to all the world that it is born!" (viii). Hillhouse's plant is a quickly maturing organism whose emotional development paces its spatial development, moving from enclosed timidity to spreading confidence. Notably, this developmental trajectory moves along its own vegetal axis without direct intervention from the human mother. In this mother-child configuration, maternal control softens into a bemused intimacy in which plant-human encounters are not moments of potential assimilation, but of foundational difference that permit interspecies love, as the plant-mother notes "what a pleasure to watch [the young plant's] course" of growth (viii). Rather than regulating the parameters of Victorian family, archival traces of the plant-centered home materialize modes of familial intimacy that validate the dignity plant lives and grant women agency to undertake different methods of child rearing.

Archiving Bodies

THE INUNDATION.

Jan Verhas, "The Inundation" *Illustrated London News.* *© Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans*

The March 13th 1875 edition of the *Illustrated London News* ran Jan Verhas's "The Inundation" showcasing a young girl, nearly on tiptoe, enthusiastically watering a rubber plant and chair while other potted plants wait their turns. The image captures the thrill of multiple bodies colliding: water dripping, child teetering, plants sprawling. This section takes up the transportive possibilities of plant-human relations through the figure of the archival body. Providing an alternative to dominant nineteenth-century configurations of archival bodies that rely on separable wholeness, I argue that plant motherhood stresses physical, temporal, and emotional entwinements among human and plant bodies.

Archives have long been described as bodies of documents and knowledge. In his 1841 circular, Natalis de Wailly, the head of France's Archives Nationales, specified that discrete collections of documents should "originate from a [specific] body … a family, or an individual," characterizing an archival collection as the material proxy of a flesh-and-blood human (qtd. in Sweeney, 2008, 197). Charles Danvers of the British empire's India Office continues to construct the colonial archival body through his Central Registry, which would act as the "brain" or "the central and motive power to keep all the other Departments in fully swing" (qtd. In Joyce 2013, 176). Archivists Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin tapped into biological rhetoric to explain the nature of archives in their 1898 manual: "the archive is an organic whole, a living organism, which grows, takes shape and undergoes change" (34-5). Whether human or simply organismal, the bodies presented through these nineteenth-century archival theories unite through language of the centralized whole.

Taken together, gender and sexuality studies and critical plant studies produce a generative node through their shared commitments in reconfiguring the traditional rhetoric of the archival body. The material plasticity of the physical human body lends mutability to the otherwise stolid archival body. Not simply accretive bodies of knowledge, the archival body can become a site that Jamie A. Lee describes as a series of "configurations, reconfigurations, and (un)becoming" (Lee, 2021, 116). Pushing the body-as-archive's dynamism further, Bissell and Haviland argue that the body produces a "sentient archive … infused with cognitive potential, inseparable from its archived contents" (2018, 2). Archival studies scholars Wendy Duff and Jessica Haskell appeal to more-than-human body systems to theorize how archivists appraise and arrange their collections. Tapping into vegetal language, they investigate how the rhizome, the subterranean root systems of plants, model an "open, nonhierarchical, and acentric system" (2015). Duff and Haskell's call to the vegetal remains the realm of figuration, but critical plants studies tread in decidedly more material territory. As noted in the previous section, plant themselves are archival, but they do not function according to a logic of centralization. Rather, plant bodies exist in a perpetual state of "being-together" with various elements, such as "air, moisture, soil, warmth, and sunlight" (Marder, 158). Their bodies manifest the expansive contiguities that document their long-term attentiveness to the elemental movements and vibrations that sustain their lives.

The twin dynamisms of feminist and plant archival bodies rescript the human-centered temporal logics governing the Victorian nuclear family by making room for vegetal timelines. Narratives of cultural progress equate the British mother with futurity, as her children supplied evidence of the British empire's future. Plant maternity skews these rather straightforward temporal dynamics, since plant-human intimacies require that we address our fundamental temporal differences. Witnessing the birth of a seedling similarly compels Lizzie Hillhouse to meditate on the regenerative timescales of plant lives: "How strange to think that these tiny

seeds have been developing, multiplying, renewing themselves for untold decades" (1897, vii). The birth of plant, for Hillhouse, is not simply a promise of human-based progression, but a moment for acknowledging vegetal pasts, the *longue durée* histories of plant development that supersede those of the human. Seedlings are not blank slates, but vast archives of vegetal life. To be a plant mother is not to preserve the future of the British empire, but to honor a multiplicity of lives in their past and present forms, thereby undoing the progressive-driven logics of British maternity.

While Hillhouse's writings possess an endearing earnestness, other articulations of the strange temporal dynamics of plant-human lives strike a more humorous note. Plants did not just slow down the movement of time, but also sped up developmental trajectories as plant children picked up some rather mature habits. Plant parents praised the self-motivated qualities of seedlings who could generate their own vital fluids for consumption and growth. A glowing review of a lecture to the Kirkcaldy Naturalists Society (1882) mentions the young plants' intoxicating drink of choice: "This saccharine food is first converted into wine before being used, so that the baby plant is by no means to be considered a teetotaler. (Loud laughter)" (*Fifeshire Advertiser*). These junior epicures also enjoyed a bit of cigar smoke to stay in top condition since tobacco smoke reliably destroyed mealy bugs: place "cigar-ends on coals in a small dish, and hold it under the plants …then shake the plants thoroughly, and sweep away all the insects which fall from them" (Williams, 1889, 15). The image of smoked-filled air swaddling a group of wine-drunk plantlings initially feels more like a den of vice than it does a garden variety drawing room, but the specific needs of the young plants render this tobacco- and wine-soaked venture an expression of maternal care.

Emotional architectures also infuse archival bodies. In her work on Dutch colonial administrative archives, Ann Laura Stoler argues that these official documents possess "itineraries of their own"; not simply physical accounts of governmental actions, they are emotional records awash in unseen "doubt and uncertainty" about how to imagine and legislate a shifting imperial world, especially as "affections and attachments—familial or otherwise" leak into otherwise "'rational' and reasoned state" (Stoler, 2010, 3;2). Feminist and queer scholarship has similarly fleshed out the emotional lives of archival materials. The methodological and emotional textures of these works vary, ranging from speculating on the "social life of photographs," (Campt, 2012), addressing trauma in archives (Cvetkovich, 2003), and centering the personal, as opposed to organizational, record (Douglas and Mills, 2018). Overarchingly, Ann Cvetkovich delineates "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions," in which emotions inhere the documents themselves and arise through production and circulation (2004, 7). I would like to extend Cvetkovich's "cultural texts" to include houseplants (and their textual representations), and in doing so, acknowledging critical plant studies questions that grapple with the possibility of loving plants and establishing friendships with them. Michael Marder contends that plant-human amities could reframe the synchronicity of anthropocentric friendship: "Formulated otherwise, friendship is willingness to share a world (which is not the same things as the environment or the universe) across unavoidable differences in perspective between I and the other" (27). Combining feminist and critical plant studies approaches reveals the conjoined archival capacities of houseplants, as archives of their more-than-human world and the women and families who cared for them.

The physical entanglements of plant and human bodies located in the Victorian home produced a varied affective terrain, the primary one being love. Critical plant studies warn

against the anthropocentric tendency to designate plants as "correlatives of human emotions," recommending instead to preserve the "mysterious intricacies of vegetal lives" (Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira 2017, xi). John Mollison's *The New Practical Window Gardener* (1877) initially casts plants as proxies of the human mind, as the close physical proximity of plants as "daily companions in our rooms," blooms into affection as the plants transmogrify into archival tokens of "our very existence" and "the love of friends and companions" (118). Mollison, however, avoids fully instrumentalizing the plant's archival dimensions for human use by acknowledging that "every plant in our home will have its own history, its own pleasant associations. Every bud, leaf, and frond will be dear to us, having watched them one by one and expanding in the light" (119). By mentioning their own histories and associations, Mollison validates the unique sentience of vegetal life not necessarily interpretable through human-centered modes of understanding, granting them a sense of more-than-human individuality. This does not necessarily lead to estrangement, as watching the plant grow, generate, and archive its own memories in turn inspires love and tenderness in the plant parent who stretches beyond anthropocentric thought systems to recognize the slow-moving process of witnessing plant development.

The self-denying and endlessly patient mother figure provided the foundational heartbeat for the cultural imaginary of the middle-class home throughout the nineteenth century. Immortalized through Coventry Patmore's saccharine poem, "The Angel in the House," the ideal British woman should "love with a love that cannot tire" (1887, 75). Women's relationships with plants supplied surprising antidotes to this cult of maternity, as their writings record conflicting feelings towards motherhood beyond sentimentalized sacrifice. Elizabeth Kent affirms that love, contrary to Coventry Patmore, is not always a measure of maternal success through her good-natured confession that "many a plant I have destroyed, like a fond and mistaken mother, by an inexperienced tenderness" (1823, xliii). Focusing on plants that have successfully grown up, Anna Warner embraces the undesirable emotions, like frustration, that accompany motherhood by admitting to her readers that her sand-verbena is "a little witch" and "intractable," yet still lovable (1872). By expressing their difficulties in relatively untrammeled ways, women horticulturalists rebuked prevailing iterations of maternal love, instead using their relationships with plants to reconsider the emotional contours of child-rearing.

Coda: Archiving Grief

This essay has reconstructed the different embodiments and emotions that merge into the figure of the Victorian plant mother. From seedlings to full-grown children, plants have refashioned the contours of women's spatial, temporal, and embodied experiences of the nineteenth century. As the shadow of death inevitably darkens the indoor garden, I end with endings. Plant care becomes an example of "grief work" interlacing archival spaces and bodies. Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas theorize archiving as "grief work," examining how "documents, objects, bodies, dreams" aid in parents' "work of grieving, remembering" and continuing connections with their children (2021, 18). Their definition of the archival record encompasses the embodied and spatial dynamics introduced in this essay, including "records *of the body,* records *on the body*, and records that *interact with the body* … repeated rituals performed in the memory of the child" (2021, 19). Victorians too performed their own elaborate grief work. Homes transformed into informal archival repositories storing the memories of loved ones through objects, like clothing and letters, and body parts, like

locks of hair and pieces of bone (Lutz, 2014, 1). While these relics aggregate through the human body, plant bodies also served as archives of domestic bereavement.

For nineteenth-century women, houseplants were material conduits for honoring lost ones, as Henry T. Williams tenderly writes: "Flowers, plants often supply the place of children in bereaved homes… She never tires of looking upon their graceful shapes, or the brightly colored jewel blossoms drooping downwards, for they remind her of the delight they once gave her little child before it went to its angel home" (1872, 7). The mourning plant mother innovates on the dominant archival trope of maternity, which presupposed a future of limitless procreative fecundity, to give voice to an alternative discourse that honors the real feelings and anxieties of women. Plants were mainstays of Victorian death cultures; horticulturalist Joseph Breck poses a rhetorical question for his readers that beckons to houseplants' symbolic values: "Who does not venerate and love some tree, or rose, or honeysuckle, planted, it may be, by the hand of some absent or departed mother, or sister, or brother?" (1856, 16).

Not all endings are firm. The regenerative qualities of houseplants—their climbing vines, flourishing fronds, and blooming buds— bring perpetually renewed life to memories of loved ones. Beyond the plants themselves, the habit of caring for plants kindled renewal in supposed endings. In *Window Gardens for the People* (1863), Samuel Hadden Parkes spotlights a widow who spends her days tending a single geranium; years of care gave the widow a new outlet for maternal grief and love, as she marvels: "'I did not believe that I should ever care for anything again in this world like I have care for that geranium. Indeed, sir, I've got almost to love it as if it could speak" (50). By this extended act of mothering, the plant both exemplifies grief work and makes space for interspecies amity, as it does not simply replace human memories but rather engenders unique plant-human love.

Victorian mothers and plants make bloom new theoretical kin. Despite species differences, feminist and critical plants studies unite in their shared commitments to expanding traditional definitions of archives, archiving, and archival materials. Images and words plant-human relations persist within the discursive violence of colonial archival infrastructures, and we may lose track of their energies as their perspectives flicker. But, when we focus us how these dispersed moments cohere, we find an orientation that validates emotional and embodied attachments to the more-than-human world.

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