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Cactus: Thoughts on Home, Grammar, and Personhood

Janice Vis

My home is with Cactus.

I wasn't raised in a particular home or place. My family were movers, following my father's career while my mother picked up whatever work she could, and so I grew up among five different city-places and fifteen distinct dwelling-places. In my twenty-odd years of life, I've been privileged to always be housed, to be a settler who has settled in many places. But *to settle* is not *to home*, and what is home when you've had fifteen?

Home is a cactus. It's a giant Schlumbergera cactus, a mosaic of thick, supple, linked leaves, soft branches tumbling over the lip of a giant soup pot. My mother lugged Cactus through every city, into every house. My memory winds itself around Cactus, an ever-green presence in ever-changing living spaces. When I think of home, I think of Mom's Schlumbergera cactus.

But what is a *cactus*?

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer capitalizes the names of specific non-human beings as proper nouns. She "writes freely of Maple" when addressing a particular Maple tree and "of maple" to reference a general classification, or "a category or concept."¹ It's one of several grammatical decisions she makes to address the plants and animals that she meets as persons, as particular individuals with their own unique lives. Kimmerer's grammar is unconventional, and she recalls one of her students protesting that non-humans are not (and should not be written as) "people in furry [or leafy] costumes."² The student's concern may be well-intentioned—it's important to respect the difference between different kinds of beings—but Kimmerer isn't claiming maples are humans. Instead, she's understanding the name "Maple" like many would understand a human name: as a designation for a specific being, a particular person. But then, what is a *person*? Do I need a solidified definition of person before writing about a non-human (Cactus, for instance) as a person, and what difference could it make?

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 385.

² Kimmerer, 57.

In late September 2020, I saw a Schlumbergera cactus in the grocery store, and I thought of home. Not of any distinct home: just the idea of home, the hope for home, the memory of my mother. Now Cactus rests on the top shelf of my rickety writing desk, tucked in the corner of my sixteenth dwelling-place in city number six: a basement apartment in a city called Hamilton. I know Cactus is not my mom's Cactus. This one's branches are too short and its leaves too gaunt, barely peeking over the edge of a five-inch plastic pot. But this home is not my mom's home. Is this my home? Do I have a home here? What is *home*?

The Canadian poet Don McKay once described home-making as "the inner life finding outer form" that "makes possible the possession of the world."³ Home-making transforms *this* place into *my* place. There is something dangerous about this aspect of home-making. Taken too narrowly, it can mean claiming ownership over a place and the many beings who live there. European settlers like myself have a long history of exercising this kind of claiming: I say I live in Hamilton, but this is the land of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg Peoples, and it has been known and protected by these Nations through the Dish With One Spoon Wampum agreement for centuries. Recently, European colonists claimed this land and named it Hamilton after one of their businessmen, and the European name now circulates. So, colonialism is part of how this place is known, labeled, and organized; and the overlapping and ongoing histories of place-claiming can make it hard to know how to live among other beings with care and respect.

Without denying the dangers of home-claiming, McKay also finds an aspect of home-making that unfolds as non-hierarchical sharing, a radical "opening" of the self to the external world, a cultivation of self-belonging through "collaborat[ion]" and a willingness to grow alongside others.⁴ Here, home-making isn't just me claiming, finding, or making a place of my own; it's allowing a place and the beings in it to claim, find, and make me. Put differently, a place becomes my home when I share myself with those who make up this place and when they share themselves with me. So, while I am here, in this city, at this writing desk, with whom might I share myself? How am I open to others' sharing? How can I cultivate a posture of openness—a "readiness" to share "without the desire to possess"?⁵ How might I begin home-making?

Cactus is with me.

³ Don McKay, "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home, and Nature Poetry," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 18, no. 1 (1993), accessed November 18, 2020. <http://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/8179>.

⁴ McKay, 4.

⁵ McKay, 6.

There's a sticky note by Cactus's pot. It reads:

how might a writing practice
bring me into more ethical
relationships with this place?

I unstick the sticky note to add a line.

how might a writing practice
bring me into more ethical
relationships with this place?
and/or Cactus?

I re-stick the note onto the pot. I am filled with the sound of my own breath as I
reach for more books, for more words.

Why *Cactus*? Why this word for this plant? Nothing demands Cactus be referred to as *Cactus*, and the letters c-a-c-t-u-s don't look like any cactus I've seen. And yet when I see the word *cactus*, I immediately think of a particular kind of plant, and I find myself able to linguistically address Cactus as they sit next to me.

In the second half of the twentieth century, French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote extensively about grammar, language, and meaning in his book *Of Grammatology*.⁶ His work helps illuminate the relationship between Cactus (the leafy plant living in my apartment) and the word *Cactus* (the collection of letters on a page), and so it might help me think about my role as a writer and language-user who lives, writes, and makes a home with Cactus.

First, Derrida underscores the importance of difference and comparison for language interpretation. Words aren't learned, spoken, written, or read in isolation. Instead, I compare

⁶ Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

words against each other to make sense of them. Language is “constituted by difference”:⁷ the word *cactus* is different from the word *cattail* and the word *chrysanthemum*, and by using three distinct words, I can imagine three distinct beings. But while these words are distinct, their meanings are not solidified. Language is also “constituted by... deferment” because word connotations are always under negotiation, their meanings made through negation.⁸ It is not simply that the word *cactus* is different from *chrysanthemum*: the meaning of *cactus* emerges from being not-*chrysanthemum* (and not-*cattail*, not-*clover*, and so forth.) That is, the word *cactus* makes visible some idea of *cactus*, an idea that only gains significance as it is compared with other ideas. This means that I don’t know exactly what a cactus is because there is no single cactus behind the word *cactus*. This plant isn’t exactly a cactus; there is no “exact cactus.”

The ambiguity undergirding language explains why words can mean ten things at once (“plant” is a leafy green being, a factory building, and the act of embedding), and why a poem can make sense today but not tomorrow or hold different meanings for different people. It also suggests that there’s no definite meaning inherent to a text: Derrida writes that the “‘literal’ meaning [of a written word] is yet unthought.”⁹ Writers select and arrange words to orient their readers, but there isn’t one congealed concept or object that each word represents. Instead, the reader uses textual significance in the moment they encounter words and negotiate meaning through a series of ongoing, shifting relationships wound up in what the reader knows, the contexts they’re in, and how they’ve encountered words before. And since changeable human beings are part of these relationships, words and their approximate meanings change according to humans, human home-makings, and histories. Scanning language changes over centuries reveal the cumulative effect of these shifts; word meanings can stray far from their origins. But these shifts don’t happen all at once. Instead, ever-changing people share themselves with each other in unique, specific places, and so are always altering (even just slightly) the sense of words.

While Western scholars have grappled with linguistic fluidity in abstract terminology, Indigenous thinkers have expressed this idea through land-based epistemologies. Now, I am wary of carelessly applying linguistic theories across languages and cultures. I write in English, Derrida wrote in French, and many Indigenous writers expound theories that are specific to particular Indigenous knowledge formations. Yet, when considering how meaning emerges in living environments, many Indigenous ways of knowing are especially salient. For example, while writing on Indigenous literary practices, Stó:lō author Lee Maracle notes that stories are “not just

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, preface to *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), ix-lxxxvii.

⁸ Spivak, xliii.

⁹ Derrida, 15.

educational subjects” to be de-coded in scholarly spheres; rather, sharing stories is part of collective living.¹⁰ Words do not simply sit in a dictionary but are used in places that include more-than-humans; and so, for Maracle, the act of telling or reading a story is bound to the “everyday business” of living alongside the trees, cattails, and cacti of specific places and should be understood with an eye to these relationships.¹¹ Rather than searching for a definite denotation or universalized understanding to explain a literary work, Maracle considers how a work’s meaning unfolds within her specific, grounded, multi-species community: What does a story mean for them, and how does her community bring meaning to the story? Understanding and communicating through story thus opens her to her world, revealing how she can become invested in the daily well-being of others. Isn’t there something home-making about this? Is this not a practice that invites respectful relationships between those who make and share places? Perhaps I am trying to do something similar in my writing: I use words to describe Cactus’s presence in relation to my history and present living conditions, referring to them as a specific individual who makes this place with me, hoping to learn how my language shapes (or could shape) the possibilities for home.

But what words do I choose, and how do I think about the words I am choosing? How often do I think about the relativity that underlies a linguistic system or the non-human forces that allow me to give language to experience? It’s easy to forget that a word is not exact, that words hold multiple in-motion meanings that are tied to contexts and influenced by the plants and animals around me. For McKay, the work of the nature poet “is based on a recognition” of this fluidity and of the “capacity of all things to elude” us, to never be exactly what we think or be perfectly summarized in linguistic systems. Poetry, with its attention to linguistic uncertainty, can force us to pause, to think about words-in-relationship. But usually, we want to form interpretations quickly, and our definitions and grammatical structures allow us to do so. This is often helpful. I’m thankful I can write *cactus* and know my reader isn’t imagining a chameleon. However, holding too tightly to my initial associations obscures my position within a linguistic world. I forget that I, like Maracle, can make choices as I interpret, choices bound to my context. In my forgetting, I cling to an illusion of false precision, a belief that I know exactly what *cactus* means—or what *person* means—when I don’t, because I can’t. Worse—I create an illusion of autonomy. I assume that I form an interpretation independent of my material surroundings, and thus, I don’t see how my words might be shifted by those around me or what those shifts say about my relationship to others.

¹⁰ Lee Maracle, “Towards a National Literature: ‘A Body of Writing’” in *Memory Serves: Oratories* (Edmonton: NeWest Publishers Ltd, 2015), 129.

¹¹ Maracle, 129.

Common grammar structures enable this forgetting, this illusion. When cactus-as-a-category and Cactus-as-a-being are defined by the same word, I'm more likely to equate the two ideas than compare them. If I write about my specific Cactus using the name for an abstract category, I might begin to think that this, specific plant is no different than my abstract idea of *cactus*. Kimmerer notices precisely this tendency when she laments that "once some folks attach a scientific label to a being, they stop exploring who it is."¹² The folks she's referencing are assuming that a category can tell them all they need to know. They vanish the being into an idea, and all beings of the same type become identical. Perhaps this tendency illustrates the dangers of home-claiming that McKay identifies—the impulse towards mastering rather than sharing. If I assume that someone fits perfectly into my existing knowledge, am I not also assuming I have nothing to learn from them, no reason to offer them my attention? I privilege my knowledge about this plant's type over the embodied encounter with their presence; I favour what I've heard from others over what this plant tells me themselves. To complicate matters further, not all the knowledge about a plant-type is necessarily nourishing: given the ongoing histories of colonialism I mentioned earlier, some knowledge will need to be re-learned, unlearned, or learned for the first time, and I cannot do this by ignoring the particularities of the plants. I'm not saying I shouldn't learn from past plant-relationships or past knowledge, but if I rely solely on category in my language and my understanding, I will close myself off and refuse opportunities to share, to learn.

Alternatively, if I follow Kimmerer's grammatical protocols and write "my Cactus grows," I notice the word *Cactus* is not identical to the word *cactus*: the Cactus-being is linguistically distinguished from the cactus-concept. This structure encourages me to think about the relations between the two ideas instead of folding them together; I can consider what I've previously learned about cacti while continuing to learn about this specific being. I begin to ask: how is Cactus like or unlike my constructed assumptions about cactus plants? What makes this Cactus unique? "With newly created names," writes Kimmerer, "I keep looking even closer."¹³ I find myself drawn to do the same. In doing so, I see how cacti enact similar life ways, forming familiar patterns of living. I also see how individual cacti shape these life ways to suit particular places. Cacti are flexible, responding to their environment, responding to others' actions in that environment. To share a relationship with Cactus, I will have to respect them as a cactus with cactus-habits, and I will have to respect them as Cactus who continues to learn how to inhabit our shared space.

¹² Kimmerer, 208.

¹³ Kimmerer, 208.

About a month later, white buds begin to poke out from the ends of Cactus' branches like tiny cream-coloured claws scratching their way into the world. I prod the soil, checking for moisture. One of the claw-buds shivers, teeters, snaps, and tumbles into the dirt. I stare at the little bud, cut off from their mother-plant, never to grow and blossom, never to share their beauty. And then another bud teeters and falls, joining the first. I'm a little horrified. What did I do? Is Cactus healthy here? Have I given them too much water, too little? The surface soil feels a little dry, but it still feels damp underneath. I think that's adequate, and a quick glance at google results offers some confirmation. But the buds stare back, accusingly.

I feel like a fraud. I write about collaboration but know so little about how to live alongside my fellow home-making collaborator. I know so little of home.

how might a writing practice
bring me into more ethical
relationships with this place?
and/or Cactus?

Right now, this ethical writing practice might be a note to my mother, asking for cactus-relationship advice. She's lived alongside her Cactus for over two decades, developing her own home-making habits. I reach for my phone and type out a message, explaining my situation. When my phone beeps in reply, I scan my mother's notes, scattered with contingencies: "If the cactus is in the sunlight... If the soil is moist... If you've moved the pot recently..."

I pause, looking back at the plant that is not my mom's plant in the home that is not my mom's home. My mother can't tell me exactly how to care for Cactus; she doesn't know Cactus; she doesn't know Cactus' situation. She offers me theories: proposing hypothetical situations and suggesting how a cactus might react and what a cactus might need. Care is a shifty, malleable word. It means something different for every uniquely emplaced plant.

I type another message: "how did your cactus-care change as we moved from place to place?"

My phone lights up as my mom's messages tumble over each other in short clauses and fragments, tiny stories of their shared life. She recalls watering her Cactus more in dry prairie winters and less when we lived in the Great Lakes' humid heat. She'd leave her Cactus outside in the shade during Edmonton's long summer days but learned to fear too-frequent freak hailstorms, and so she searched out sheltered corners of our yard. She tells me her Cactus's blossoming patterns moved as we did; flowers would come in December one year and mid-spring

the next (something to do with daylight hours, she thinks). I don't remember the humidity or hailstorms in such detail, couldn't tell you the contours of the landscapes or the times of sunrise. But my mother learned to pay attention to places, to act according to their rhythms, because she attended to her Cactus's dailiness. Her Cactus's well-being was (and remains) an ongoing learning experience, a shifting reality in which my mother grew (and grows) more attentive to a shared environment.

I keep typing: "did your cactus (and maybe your house plants in general) help you feel at home?"

Maybe it's a leading question, but I already know the answer. "Definitely... Plants have an emotional presence in the home. But it's a physical thing too. The plants clean the air, and they hold moisture. You can feel it."

I don't think her plants' physical and emotional impacts can be separated. My mother's physical acts of moving the pots, checking soil and leaves, and watching and adjusting her habits to meet the plants' needs came alongside an emotional investment, a desire and a decision to live with plants. Meanwhile, my mother noticed how those plants changed her environment, how the very air became full. She noticed how plants entered her lungs, her body, her home, her heart—and she appreciated their generosity, making her more eager to care for her leafy friends. My mom's home is a Cactus, a particular Cactus that she knows well. She and her Cactus are home-makers: my mother shares herself with her plant as best she can by considering her place, and the Cactus shares themselves to make that place better.

Her Cactus entered my lungs too, though I didn't realize or appreciate them in the same ways. I didn't share myself as my mother did. I didn't invest in home as my mother did. It wasn't until I left my mother's home and began to miss my mother's Cactus that I began to think seriously about plants. I didn't realize it, but I felt the presence of her plants for years, and I felt their absence after I left. The familiarity of home, offered by the growing, ever-green presence in ever-changing living spaces, made the work of scribbling out the final words of an article or leafing through a theory book easier. Without my mother's Cactus, I wasn't quite me: as a person or as a writer. That's why I took home a Schlumbergera cactus at the grocery store. My understanding of who I am as a person and how my body should feel has been shaped by my relationship to a particular Cactus who is like (but not exactly like) my Cactus who now lives with me, breathing the air in this shared space.

I think our shared air might be causing my Cactus to lose buds. My basement apartment is shadowed and damp, and I've been told to run our dehumidifier regularly. However, until quite recently, I was terrible at remembering to flick it on in the morning. Over the past week, I've finally developed the habit, hitting the button every day. The air feels different. I suspect Cactus is struggling to adjust to the sudden change. I should probably cut back on the dehumidifier for now and make future adjustments more slowly. Cactus is growing and learning, and they need

to know how much moisture they can expect to be circulating through the air. I'll need to learn how they respond to these moisture shifts too.

I reach for a new notepad: I'm going to take notes on Cactus's growth and health as I change my habits. This is also one part of a writing practice that might connect me to this place, though I don't think blunt observational notes are sufficient on their own. It matters how I read and write them. After all, my mother offered me her observations, and dehumidifiers aren't on her long list of contingencies. If I had followed her advice exactly, I would have overlooked key environmental conditions. This doesn't mean her advice is useless. Words aren't precise or finalized, and it is possible to read my mother's theoretical statements as invitations to attention (to my Cactus) rather than exact instructions (regarding cacti more generally). Her little stories about herself and her Cactus help: rather than grappling with a list of facts to memorize, I see her knowledge emerging and practised in her routines. To recall Maracle, rather than seeing my mother's words as abstractly educational, I consider how they relate to grounded settings.¹⁴ I don't just understand what my mother learned about her Cactus, but how she learned from her Cactus through her attention to place-based relations. And so, I begin to wonder if there is a healthy relationship between Cactus and the air, the soil, and the light. I contemplate how energy, nourishment, and sustenance are shared in this place, how my habits affect this sharing, and how this sharing affects myself and Cactus differently. In other words, I find myself more aware of my influence and agency here, more open to this place, more open to Cactus.

A week later, Cactus seems happier. Their pot is filling with thick branches, and their buds no longer falter. My notepad is filling too, and my phone continues its periodic flickering. I haven't texted my mom this much in months but exchanging cactus-notes has bound us together, one relationship feeding another. My attention lingers over the sticky note.

how might a writing practice
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For me, this writing practice begins with Cactus rather than cactus: the grammatical distinction helps me attend to the emplaced relations that Cactus and I share. My writing routines become

¹⁴ Maracle, 129.

routine check-ins with my fellow homemaker. I cannot describe Cactus's ongoing life without placing myself in proximity to them, and so my writing becomes a practice of being with Cactus, of contemplating Cactus's wellbeing, of noticing how that wellbeing is shaped and expressed, and of wondering what it means to be called *Cactus* here. Meanwhile, Cactus's specific ways of sharing themselves shape my writing; by using my words to consider Cactus's responses to my actions and our home, I attend to relationships that are implicated by Cactus's presence—including the linguistic relationships that allow me to express my thoughts and observations. As I search for words that best describe homemaking with Cactus, I form language in ways that are unique to this place and this relationship. Cactus's sharing becomes a part of my sharing: Cactus impacts the words I choose every day and simultaneously begins to shift my linguistic habits and my daily routines. My writing expresses Cactus's living entanglements with me, growing beyond my mother's experiences or my past knowledge, and I become increasingly invested in Cactus's life and humbled by their presence.

I'm still grateful for my mother, for her Cactus. Thanks to them, I know I need to attend to emplaced relationships, and I have some theories about how Cactus might respond to my potential actions. Such knowledge helps me cultivate my surroundings so Cactus can flourish. At the same time, as I continually direct my attention (and my language) towards Cactus, my understanding of their name and being morphs, filling with details I had not anticipated. Cactus can help me broaden my understanding of cacti and cacti-relationships, shaping my home-making habits and allowing me to use my cactus-words more intentionally. And because language is rooted in comparison and relationships, changing how I understand cacti and cactus-words inevitably affects how I interpret other words: I begin to re-consider my assumptions about this place, about others who are categorized as *cacti*, about others who are conventionally categorized as *people*, and about the possibilities of language in the places these peoples share.

I look back at Cactus, thoughtful. Their buds bulge, not yet blooming, but hopeful.

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