Making Kin with Trees through Reading.  
Biosemiotics, Talking Trees, and How Forests Think

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Peter Wohlleben was not the first to notice the buzz going on in the forest floor, but his bestseller *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) certainly made the idea of talking trees as a scientific fact palpable and popular. In Richard Powers’ novel *The Overstory* (2019) the idea grew into a plot that makes trees, if not protagonists, then at least the center of attention. This novel, with its science fiction claim to “plausibility”, puts talking trees once again on the map of a cultural imaginary. But what happened in the last decade(s) that made it plausible to think of plants in general and trees in particular as communicating beings? Do they actually talk or is that just a more or less fitting analogy? Does it help to anthropomorphize trees or does it inflict more harm? Do we have a choice other than making plants more human if we want to “understand” their and, not last, our place on the planet?

There is a reason why we encounter communicating plants in texts rather than stumble across them outside. Trees might not require language to communicate, but humans do. Thus, texts about trees – ranging from popular science, to ethnography and literary texts – allow for a path investigating how we always already take part in the forest dialogue. Taking a step back, I propose that instead of asking what trees can or cannot do, we look at the ways in which we as humans make sense of vegetal “communication” via our senses, our cultural techniques and our media. The ways in which trees are made out to signal (biosemiotics), to think (in Eduardo Kohn’s anthropology), to talk (Wohlleben and others), to tell stories (Tsing) and to act (Powers) requires arboreal reading techniques that reach well beyond literary studies.
Dr. Solvejg Nitzke teaches German literature at Technische Universität Dresden. She makes sure to sneak in as much cultural studies and comp lit as she can. Her research focuses on the narrative production of knowledge and environments, especially when these practices are disturbed. She has published on material and imaginary catastrophes, climate change, ecological story-telling in 19th-century Austria and nature writing. Her current project, “Making Kin with Trees,” explores the relationships humans hope to forge with giant plants.