

Editorial

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Critical Green Theories and Botanical Imaginaries: Exploring Human and More-than-Human World Entanglements

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Plants are involved in numerous cultural aspects of our life and are studied in a wide range of research fields, e.g. literature, philosophy, biology, medicine, politics, etc. The last few years have seen the eruption of vigorous and intensifying debates in academic and public forums about the ontological status, the role and impact of plants on various aspects of our human and non-human world. The so-called “green theories” flourishing in literary and cultural studies investigate the relationship between humans and nature. By providing new approaches and appropriate terminology, they examine how nature is portrayed in literary/cultural texts and artworks and the role of literature and art in raising environmental awareness. Plant Humanities, in particular – also known as “critical plant studies,” “human-plant studies,” or simply, “plant studies” – is a very recent branch of critical inquiry (e.g. Gagliano et al., 2016; Hall, 2011; Marder, 2013; Mabey, 2015; Mancuso & Viola, 2015; Pollan, 2013; Ryan, 2018) that has emerged as a framework for the study of plants (expressed in terms of flora, plant species, plant or vegetal life), their peculiar features and the human–plant interactions, often envisaging non-hegemonic relations between humans and the nonhuman realm.

One of the most widely known terms in Plant Humanities is “plant criticism” (Marder, 2013, pp. 8–9), which describes the study of plant representations through metaphors, symbolisms, narrative and stylistic tropes in literature, myth, art, film, and other cultural artefacts. The ability of authors, artists, botanists, and other creative minds to mediate the vegetal world through their work but also the capacity engendered within the reader, audience, or public to (re)envision nature is related to “botanical imagination.” John Charles Ryan defines the term as “the dialectical interchange of the imaginative potentialities of plants and non-plants” (Ryan, 2018, p. 11). “Plant writing” or “phytographia” (Vieira, 2015, p. 205) refers to human writings about plant lives as well as to the creative writing practices of plants writing about their own lives (e.g. Hart, 2011; Laist, 2013; Ryan, 2018; Vieira, 2017). “Plant writing” “inscribes” plants into texts, and through this practice, we consider authors as “mediator[s] in the aesthetic encounter with plants” (Vieira, 2017, p. 225). The writing of/for plants shifts from a representational way to a more inter-mediational one as the author proffers a vibrant medium between life forms. A pivotal point in this discussion is to learn how new types of practices can emerge in the symbiosis of life forms (Karpouzou & Zampaki, 2023).

The desire to let vegetal life maintain its otherness and go beyond the prevailing “humanistic modes of interpretation” of plants (Batsaki, 2021, p. 2) is expressed by current non-anthropocentric approaches (e.g. Abram, 2017; Grusin, 2015; Marder, 2013) aiming to investigate further the vegetal world, conceiving the latter, not in terms of its symbolic meaning or practical value (e.g. food, fibre, and medicine) for humans, but as an active world where plants are agents (Casey & Marder, 2024, pp. xiii–xv; Tsing, 2015, p. 145) able to

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communicate with each other and humans (Grusin, 2015, p. ix). Specifically, the non-anthropocentric approaches examine plants as agents endowed with senses, psychology, intelligence, and consciousness (e.g. Baluška & Mancuso, 2007, p. 205; Castiello, 2021, p. 127; Gagliano et al., 2016, pp. 1–2; 2017, pp. xvii–xviii; Tompkins & Bird, 1973). Moreover, these approaches raise ethical concerns such as the cultural repercussions of genetically modified organisms or the moral implications of “plant sentience” (Kallhoff et al., 2018, p. 2). Recognising “plant sentience” and granting rights to the more-than-human world can be seen as a manifestation of a post-anthropocentric way to promote solidarity and a “[...] negotiation of appropriate human-plant relationships” (Hall, 2011, p. 180). While most Western societies fail to acknowledge the importance of vegetal life to the whole biosphere and to our everyday life (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999; characterised as “plant blindness,” Ryan, 2018, p. 6), it has to be noted that, historically, narrations and creative practices which form western imaginaries have been inextricably connected and materially indebted to plants as far as it concerns the infrastructure (paper, inks, pencils, canvas, etc.) that enables their materialisation. The approach of attributing self-determination and agency to plants might seem articulated in terms of a “return” to the indigenous, animist, or spiritual traditions of the past. On the other hand, it also encourages present and future thinking about digital plant ecologies, bio-informatics, or smart bio-cities symbiotically incorporating plants in dwelling, architecture, information, education, etc. It also redresses some “epistemological blind spots of the Anthropocene” (Barua, 2024, pp. 26–27) such as the overexploitation of natural resources. The neologism of “Plantationocene” (e.g. Davis et al., 2019; Haraway, 2015; Murphy & Schroering, 2020), as an alternative term for our epoch, registers the ways that the logic of plantation controls modern economies, environments, bodies, and social relations and reveals an “ecology of relations and scales, never cleaved from the uneven and coercive effects of power” (Barua, 2024, p. 31).

Plant Humanities contributes to bringing attention to the biases against plants, which have been marginalised by traditional scholars and treated instead as unconscious and insentient, a mere background to human activities or stories. A “turn” to the study of the vegetal world is meant to examine the peculiar characteristics of plant life and complex plant–human relations, but also to explore innovative, non-anthropocentric thinking as to how to “think like a plant.” Through “plant thinking” we could better conceive the vegetal world in a more dynamic, transformational, and evolving way rather than instrumentalising it, leading to a more efficient pondering on questions such as how we are implicated in the vegetal world and how we can “listen” to the diverse plant voices across nature. We argue that in this sense, a “vegetal turn” (e.g. Di Paola, 2024), by situating itself within a broader cultural “nonhuman turn” (Grusin, 2015), timely shifts attention toward nonhuman others. These new plant-centred approaches could contribute to speculation about unfamiliar ways to face the current environmental crisis by “repairing” our relationship with the nonhuman world.

This special issue is built upon the “vegetal turn” which investigates further how our thinking could conceive the plant world in terms of *who* and not *what*, imagining and creating plant narratives that offer and shape new perspectives across the Humanities. Specifically, the articles explore various vegetal narrative cultures that emerge when plants co-author and shape narrative practices, how plant stories partake in creating multi-species societies, and how plant articulations are embedded in narrative contexts.

Virgilio Aquino Rivas and Hazel T. Biana’s article titled “On Vegetal Geography: Perspectives on Critical Plant Studies, Placism, and Resilience” contributes to the emerging subdiscipline of vegetal geography, exploring the interactions between the human and non-human world in times of crisis. The interactions between the human systems and non-human ones are also studied by Todd LeVasseur in his article titled “The Soil is Alive: Cultivating Human Presence Towards the Ground Below Our Feet,” which invites readers to re-think the presence and role of soil, introducing the term of *soliumpoietics* to approach new research regimes of plant-based caloric lifeways which are regenerative to soil, plants, and thus, the human.

An emerging environmental culture which emphasises a more-than-human embeddedness and embraces symbiotic over competitive relationships is studied by Vera Alexander in her article titled “Growing Transilience: Garden Narratives as More-than-Human Life Writing” where she investigates five plant narratives as a form of a “more-than-human” life writing that showcases plant-human relationships. In the article titled ““Give It Branches & Roots”: Virginia Woolf and the Vegetal Event of Literature,” Anna Wiktorja Potoczny studies Virginia Woolf’s diaries, paying particular attention to the vegetal imagery. In the same line with the previous article, the term “botanical imaginary” is studied by Majda Atieh and Ula Ahmad in their article titled

“Botanical imaginary of indigeneity and rhizomatic sustainability in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” which explores how the author conceives the plant world and how the latter shapes the author’s way of thought and writing. Similarly, Katrin Pahl’s article titled “Blood Run Beech Read: Human-Plant Grafting in Kim de l’Horizon’s *Blutbuch*” explores human–vegetal relations and material plant language, arguing that the materiality of language is constitutive of trans-corporeality. Lastly, Joyjit Ghosh and Sk Tarik Ali’s article titled “Can I Become a Tree?”: Plant Imagination in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English” examines how Indian poetry written in English is implicated in didacticism when it critiques the unprecedented botanical loss in the Anthropocene.

Moving from literature to art, Eleonor Botoman’s article titled “Gardens in the Gallery: Displaying and Experiencing Contemporary Plant-art” explores different approaches to exhibiting and maintaining living, plant-based sculptures and installation art. Moreover, Gry Hedin’s article titled “From Flowers to Plants: Plant Thinking in nineteenth-century Danish Flower Painting” investigates significant Danish artists and the artistic perspective on plants that can inspire and help us to reorient our relationship with the natural world. In the same line with the previous article, Edoardo Capurro’s article “*Becoming-with* in Anicka Yi’s Artistic Practice” attempts to highlight how Yi’s artworks are particularly compelling examples of the human and more-than-human world’s relationship.

Inter-medial approaches to the human and more-than-human world are studied in the article titled “Call of the Earth: Ecocriticism Through the Non-Human Agency in M. Jenkin’s *Enys Men*” in which Tatiana Kravko explores how experimental cinema can be a cultural mediator of vegetal forms, addressing symbiotic relationships between the human and non-human life forms, and Audrey Miller’s article titled “Plants as Trans Ecologies: Artifice and Deformation in Bertrand Mandico’s *The Wild Boys* (2017)” explores how artifice and queer forms in Bertrand Mandico’s film interrogate more-than-human entanglements to orient viewers toward a trans ecology.

The ways in which humans engage with other species through sound offers ground for exploration and dialogue. Asunción López-Varela Azcárate’s article titled “Ecopoetic Noticing: The Intermedial Semiotic Entanglements of Fungi and Lichen” employs Peircean semiotics to delve into the nuanced realm of examining the more-than-human forms of communication and underscoring the latent communicative potential inherent in all life forms. Moreover, Juliana España Keller’s article titled “Entering into a Sonic Intra-Active Quantum Relation with Plant Life” focuses on a symbiotic relation between humans and plants as an acoustic shimmering ecology to communicate a posthuman and symbiotic understanding of vegetal matter as a morphological force that re-shapes and re-affirms our sonic intra-relations with the natural world. In the same line, Cana F. McGhee’s article titled “Listening to the Virtual Greenhouse: Musics, Sounding, and Online Plantcare” explores how human-plant assemblages engage with “back-to-nature” environmentalism and how human and non-human relationships are reframed through acoustic practices.

Promoting and preserving cultural legacies, including botanical traditions, are integral components of national identity and development strategies in many countries, particularly in the Global South. Stanley Timeyin Ohenhen et al.’s article “Decolonising Plant-Based Cultural Legacies in the Cultural Policies of the Global South” seeks to address issues of colonial legacies in cultural heritage management and provokes discourses on equitable and sustainable approaches to plant-based heritage preservation.

The different “green” narrations foregrounded bind all life forms, inspire our relationship with the vegetal world and (re)affirm our belonging to the natural world. This special issue discusses the necessity to rethink and reevaluate plants by encouraging an interdisciplinary dialogue, whereby different research fields would learn from each other to conceive and depict vegetal life with critical awareness. In conclusion, we hope that this special issue unspools a thread that will hopefully guide us into the greener ground of a “vegetal turn.”

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