

LUCI ATTALA AND LOUISE STEEL, eds. *PLANTS MATTER: EXPLORING THE BECOMINGS OF PLANTS AND PEOPLE*. 1ST ED. CARDIFF: UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS 2023. 244 P. ISBN: 9781837720507

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When it comes to social science research, plants have not always mattered. Often merely part of landscape descriptions, vegetal beings are just now starting to receive in-depth scholarly attention. The edited volume *Plants matter: exploring the becomings of plants and people* (2023) is one of the most recent additions to the trend of plant research within anthropology. The book brings together an array of researchers – anthropologists, ethnobotanists, archaeologists, plant scientists, healers, and herbalists – intending to critique linguistic and epistemological structures that separate humans from plants. Despite the diversity of topics covered, all chapters have a common goal: inspired by New Materialities debates, the authors explore how humans and plants share, exchange, and co-create materials in a constant process of becoming together (2, 3).

This project is conducted in a Euro-American context, where plants are not seen as agentic or intelligent – at least not in a way similar to humans. This geographic frame is important since human/plant relations are often only studied in non-Western settings. Therefore, paying attention to the diversity of ways people in Euro-America see and relate to the vegetal world is an essential task in a time of accelerated bio-diversity loss and environmental collapse. *Plants matter*, however, does not overlook the importance of a dialogue with Indigenous knowledge to question our own understandings of plant life. Chapters 3 ('Plants as medicine in the Anthropocene', by Sarah Edwards) and 4 ('The world tree: humans, trees and creation on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta', by Falk Parra Witte) adopt ethnographic perspectives, describing how different groups relate to plants as medicine and as kin, respectively.

But more productive is chapter 5, 'Composing with plants: discerning their call', which goes beyond an ethnobotanical perspective and is created in a collaborative effort between anthropologist Julie Laplante and Kañaa, a Baasa healer from Cameroon. Drawing on the latter's teachings, Laplante learned to hear the calling of plants to receive their guidance and cure illness. This new sensibility to vegetal materiality and faculties, when put in debate with European thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, Emanuele Coccia, Tim Ingold, and Natasha Myers, enable the authors to conceptualise plants as fields of possibilities, where their taste, texture, and aroma are key features of their agency, which can be apprehended through close and attentive observation and conviviality. The strength of such a perspective is that 'this is a way that enables one to bring plants into academic compositions without becoming their spokesperson or turning them into objects. It seeks to notice attentionally from an increased awareness to their expressions in intimate copresence' (115).

Throughout the volume, this material and sensorial project is worked in different ways. Most chapters, however, choose to focus on the ingestion of plants, as eating is seen by multiple authors as the most intimate way to get to know them. The desire to eat certain types of grains, argues the author of chapter 2, 'The materiality of plants: plant-people

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entanglements', Marijke Van der Veen, led to the selection of mutants which could not disperse on their own, creating a complex entanglement between humans and plants of which neither can now escape. In chapter 6, 'The matter of knowing plant medicine as ecology: from vegetal philosophy and plant science to tea tasting in the Anthropocene', Guy Waddell argues that the physiological incommensurability between animals and plants can be bridged through consumption, which enables relationships (138). Seeking refuge from the COVID-19 pandemic led many to allotments and home gardens, describes Sarah Page in chapter 7, 'Escaping to the garden and tasting life', where they found a new way to interact with nature by growing their own food. Tastier and more nutritious vegetables enabled a deeper and more sensorial connection to their world. Acknowledging how plants can communicate through an often-overlooked sense – taste – is where the volume's focus on materiality shines. Rather than adhering to a view of agency, where only beings that can communicate visually or acoustically can act intelligently, this perspective elicits how plants can affect other beings and fulfil their wishes through taste and healing properties, what could be seen by others as the epitome of their subjugation.

Despite the merit of this consumption perspective and its potential to shed light on certain aspects of human/plant relations, the book's rather restricted theoretical approach at times loses sight of other forms that such relations can take. Other than ingesting, people also cultivate, own, sell, and care for plants, among others. What further theoretical insights could have been gained if more attention had been given to other ways of relating to plants? This shortfall can be identified in Laplante and Kaña'a's critique of how plants were seen during the COVID-19 pandemic: 'In this current pandemic derailment, many are looking towards the vegetal. The vegetal emerges mostly as isolated molecules synthesised, unrecognisable, as part of a global biomedical tradition, already having lost sight of the plant from which they came. Plants however don't appear as lawful allies, as ways of enlivening bodies and regenerating the air we breathe, perhaps also reviving our cosmology' (128).

This appears to be a limited view of current Euro-American human/plant relations. During the pandemic, many turned to gardening and houseplants to seek refuge from the dangers that lurked outside. New social media trends began when people acquired several houseplants and started calling themselves 'plant parents', dedicating considerable time and resources to keeping such beings alive for their aesthetic, meditative, and affective potential. More than molecules to be ingested as medicine, plants did indeed become friends, children, and protectors – roles that cannot always be achieved when plants are seen solely as foodstuff or medicine. The book does try to engage with such other perspectives, especially in chapters 4, which focuses on the kinship and cosmological values of trees for the Kogi of Colombia, and 8, which explores technical and technological influences of tobacco in regions where its cultivation has been abandoned. However, such pieces do not fit well in the overarching volume and their arguments do not contribute to the book as a whole, these debates and arguments seem to have been included to add variety rather than strengthen the piece.

Such limitation is, nevertheless, small in comparison to the theoretical and epistemological advances achieved in *Plants matter*, which is a solid contribution both to New Materialities debates and social sciences' research on plants. Further, it is a shortcoming that arises mainly from its moment of publication, when theoretical engagements with plants are only burgeoning. Rather than seeing such limitation as a flaw, it should be seen as an exciting potential for anyone who wishes to work with plants that still have much more knowledge to give.

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