

Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction, by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari



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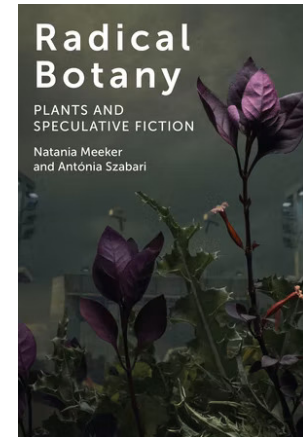
Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*. Fordham UP, 2020. Paperback. 314 pg. \$32.00. ISBN: 9780823286638.

For Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, plants are “engine[s] of social critique and speculation” (16), always already exceeding human categories and ways of being. In their argument, vegetality and speculative fiction share a foundational characteristic: a strangeness that both withdraws from human systems of meaning and fuels our imaginations, enabling us to contemplate possible futures.

The authors’ comparative archive, too, evades traditional categories of scholarly study, as they read texts across time, language, and medium, looking at cultural productions from early modern libertines, experimental filmmakers, critical theorists, and contemporary novelists. Meeker and Szabari uncover a genealogy of what they call “radical botany” that begins in the seventeenth century, demonstrating how the posthuman is already present in the early modern.

From radical departures from standard taxonomical orthodoxy to a reimagining of Romantic vitalism, the first several chapters of *Radical Botany* trace an emergent modernity anchored, as Meeker and Szabari argue, in shifts in the vegetal imaginary. The first chapter, “Radical Botany: An Introduction,” outlines the shape of their inquiry and how it relates to previous scholarship in critical plant studies, including that of Michael Marder, Jeffrey Nealon, and Natasha Myers, among other areas of critical theory. Meeker and Szabari argue that while theories and representations of “vegetal beings” (13) are significant to the rise of Western modernity, their influence has often been overlooked in favor of the animal model—hungry and desiring—that has dominated our perception of the modern subject.

The second chapter, “Libertine Botany and Vegetal Modernity,” demonstrates how Guy de La Brosse and Cyrano de Bergerac imagine plants as useful figures for a humankind that is now, post-Copernicus, coming to terms with the fact that it is not the center of the universe. For these writers, plants both undermine anthropocentric narratives and inspire curiosity (and, in the case of Cyrano’s work, enable various erotic encounters). Plants also activate utopian speculation, as Meeker and Szabari argue in Chapter Three, “Plant Societies and Enlightened Vegetality,” through



the intermingling of science and fiction in eighteenth-century fictions that use plant life as "a basis for imagining a better human existence" (56). The authors find a nascent biopolitics embedded in Ludvig Holberg and Charles-François Tiphaigne de La Roche's fictions, especially in the writers' portrayals of natural and biological processes, including reproduction, as "objects of social control" (69). Plants in these fictions offer suggestive models for human society; however, their preoccupation with cultivation, growth, and manipulation engenders new forms of violence, as well.

Chapter Four, "The Inorganic Plant in the Romantic Garden," crosses the pond to find in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman an alternative to Romantic vitalism and its accompanying veneration of the garden as the model for interconnectedness and political community. In the Romantic garden, plants are essentially animalized and thus understood as containing some interior desire that draws them into economies of human sympathy and identification. In contrast, Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), the chapter's primary focus, explores the horror of the inorganic plant, vegetal sentience utterly indifferent to humans yet capable of transforming our consciousness.

Rather than view the possibilities of vegetal vitality with horror, filmmakers Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac, whose work is explored in the fifth chapter, "The End of the World by Other Means," look with excitement toward how plants can be powerful tools for transforming audiences. For Epstein and Dulac, the plant is an avatar of modernity (139), a figure for cinema's "alien logic" (116), or an embodiment of a queer perception, and (nonhuman) bodily geometry (138). The filmmakers share with writer Collette an interest in the time-lapse films of Jean Comandon, such as "La germination d'un grain de blé" (ca. 1922), which makes the germination of a grain of wheat perceptible to the human eye—at least through the mediation of the camera lens, which itself creates a hybrid of human/nonhuman points of view. In contrast to Epstein and Dulac, Collette sees horror in the instrumentalization of time-lapsed images of plants, which she argues removes them from the realm of human identification and "poetry" (142).

Collette's ambivalence leads into Chapter Six, "Plant Horror: Love Your Own Pod," which looks at Don Siegel's and Philip Kaufman's versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 and 1978). Instead of reading the films as representations of paranoia about authoritarianism and standardization (146), Meeker and Szabari argue that they are connected to a longer speculative tradition that attributes to plants an inorganic vitality that cannot be captured by animal models of being. The pods in both versions of *Invasion* bring about homogenization, but also, especially in Siegel's version, allow us to explore desire outside of the bounds of the human and experience a "vegetal striving" that connect to plants' capacity for proliferation. Here the authors return to Chapter Three's interest in biopolitics, examining how plants can become "representatives of neoliberalism" (163) as the ability to intervene in the reproduction of life itself gives rise to economies focused on limitless growth. (Perhaps this point links *Radical Botany* to Rebekah Sheldon's somatic capitalism, though the authors don't cite her work). Despite that reading, the authors conclude that the *Invasion* films gesture toward a model of ecological thinking that

postdates them—one where separations between self and other, or natural object and human subject, no longer organize our relationship to the world.

The final chapter, “Becoming Plant Nonetheless,” examines the way that thinkers, artists, and writers employ the plant to spur on feminist politics and a critique of capitalism: modes of inquiry ready and willing to challenge (if not dispose of) models of the self that reveal inherent sexism and heteronormativity. What if plants destabilize our world-making efforts rather than augment them? The chapter’s objects of study range widely and include Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome as a radical botanical figure, artwork by Jessica Rath, and feminist speculative plant fictions by Anne Richter (“Un Sommeil de plante” [1967]), Ursula K. Le Guin (“Vaster than Empires and More Slow” [1971], *The Word for World is Forest* [1972]), and Han Kang (*The Vegetarian* [2007]). Meeker and Szabari conclude by reflecting on how the vision of hybridity that Jeff VanderMeer renders in his *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) affirms ecologically committed, feminist, and antiracist political projects (200). Plants are, finally, our “guide to the end of the world” (201), ushering us toward political and social possibilities yet uncharted.

One of the book’s earliest moments—a discussion of the tension between plants’ apparent passivity and their ability to participate in the world—suggests a road not taken, or possible extension, for *Radical Botany*’s argument. Here Meeker and Szabari are in conversation with the field of performance and ecology, particularly with artist-activists like Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle (“Ecosex Manifesto”), and Genevieve Belleveau and Themba Alleyne, whose eco-fetishism shares *Radical Botany*’s interest in the oscillation between plant agency and passivity. The relevance of *Radical Botany* to performance studies underscores one of my favorite aspects of Meeker and Szabari’s work: their rich and flexible archive that connects science, theories of art, visual and textual media, historical periods, and literary traditions and colorfully illustrates their vision of vegetal beings as enticing partners in lived experience that always retain an uncanny liveliness, never fully assimilable into human economies of meaning and desire.

This varied archive and the genealogy of speculative botanical texts it uncovers are the book’s most distinctive contributions to plant studies. The idea that nonhuman beings are both relevant to human world-imagining and a kind of impersonal materiality withdrawn from human concerns is not a new argument in posthuman theory, nor is the idea that speculative texts can aid us in imagining better worlds; however, the braid of speculative fiction, botanical texts, and the emergence of modernity is a compelling one and makes the book well worth reading and thinking with.

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