Plants in Science Fiction, edited by Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä

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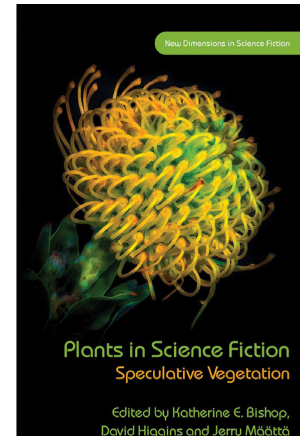

As Heather Sullivan warns us, “if the vegetal fails, we fail” (7). Not only do plants produce the air we breathe and the crops we eat, but they also form the basis of a variety of objects (clothing, medicine, fuel, etc.) that have allowed for the development of human culture. The biological and cultural evolution of humans has always been deeply intertwined with that of plants; as Atul Bhargava and Shilpi Srivastava attest, the development of agriculture through the domestication of plants was “a major turning point in both the environmental and cultural history of human beings” (6), one that “is marked by changes on both sides of the mutualistic relationship, as both partner populations, over time, become increasingly interdependent” (11). Plants are also much more “alive” than previously thought, as has been demonstrated by a number of advances in plant biology. Yet, despite our interdependence, “Plants seem to inhabit a time-sense, a life cycle, a desire-structure, and a morphology,” explains Randy Laist, “that is so utterly alien that it is easy and even tempting to deny their status as animate organisms” (12). How can this gap be bridged, between the vital importance of plant life on the one hand, and the inability of humans to “see” (both literally and metaphorically) plants—a phenomenon that James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler call “plant blindness” (3)—on the other?

Following on the heels of the so-called “animal turn” (Ritvo 119), a “vegetal turn” (Hall x) in the Humanities has emerged which attempts to address this very question. While, as Catriona Sandiland notes, “the vegetal has been ‘turning’ for a long time” (Cielemęcka and Szczygielska 4), particularly in Indigenous and feminist contexts, there has certainly been an uptick in the type of plant-focused scholarship now referred to as Critical Plant Studies. This field, which “challenges the privileged place of the human in relation to plant life” (Stark 180), coalesced in the early 2010s primarily in the field of philosophy (with a major assist from the work of philosopher Michael Marder), but a series of literary-focused works have since emerged which expand its purview. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Randy Laist’s edited collection, *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), through which Laist argues for sustained inquiry by literary

theorists into the ontological status of plants. Other examples include *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2016), ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (2017) by John C. Ryan, and *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (2019) by Elizabeth Hope Chang.

Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation (2020), edited by Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä, is the latest in this lineage of works, and one of the first to turn its vegetal gaze toward science fiction. Slightly pre-empted by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari's *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*, which lists 2020 as its publication year but in fact was available in December 2019, *Plants in Science Fiction* nevertheless remains the first edited collection on the topic. The rationale for its consideration of plants in science fiction, argued for convincingly by Katherine E. Bishop in the introduction, is simple: "One of the greatest boons of sf is the way it allows us to confront that which is alien to us – worlds, thoughts, experiences, desires and lives that are not our own. [...] And what alive is more alien to humans than plants?" (3). Not only is there a similarity between human consideration of plants and SF tropes of literal aliens, but also plants sometimes become the "alien" threat in these works, depicted as more disruptive and more alive than they appear in everyday life. The cognitive estrangement of SF is an effective method of combating plant blindness, forcing plants and their unwieldy, overgrowing, unknowable otherness directly into view.

Plants in Science Fiction consists of an introduction followed by ten chapters divided into thematic streams. These chapters address the alterity of plants as well as the "commonalities, hybridities, and mutual forms of growth" (5) between plants and humans in a range of sf narratives from the late 19th to the 21st century. They take a variety of theoretical tacks, from new materialism to postcolonialism to queer theory to posthumanism. All engage in some way with Critical Plant Theory, with some—like T.S. Miller's, which references Elaine P. Miller's *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (2002)—even working to recontextualize it. While the volume is uneven in places, with a few chapters which don't quite come together, it is overall an important and exciting addition to both SF and critical plant scholarship. Its common themes include boundary slippages, hybridization, and the ability of animate plants to illuminate other fears, such as those connected to colonial violence or the transgression of sexual boundaries.

The book's alliterated streams, Abjection, Affinity, and Accord, each address a different theoretical aspect of plant-human encounters. The first, Abjection, focuses on narratives that interrogate notions of human superiority through the invocation of the monstrous vegetal. This section includes Jessica George's "Weird Flora: Plant Life in the Classic Weird Tale," Jerry Määttä's "'Bloody unnatural brutes': Anthropomorphism, Colonialism and the Return of the Repressed in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*," and Shelley Saguaro's "Botanical Tentacles and the Chthulucene." George's chapter uses a mixture of thing theory and historical evolutionary theory to argue that plants in short stories by Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and H. P. Lovecraft epitomize the resistance of objects and entities in the "weird tale" to being fully known

by humans. Through its invocation of the vegetal, the weird tale ultimately gestures towards a non-anthropocentric worldview but can never quite achieve it. The chapter seems to take a more rhizomatic approach to analysis, branching out in a number of directions, which at times undermines its argument. George's is one of a number of chapters that address the Weird and New Weird, including Saguaro's and Alison Sperling's.

Määttä's chapter, one of the shining stars of the collection, conducts a compelling investigation of Wyndham's well-known work, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Määttä draws on extensive archival and comparative research, examining the author's intertextual influences as well as various iterations of the text, including a holographic manuscript and differences across UK and US versions, while simultaneously situating the work within Wyndham's contemporary colonial context. Määttä argues that the novel depicts "a political fear masked as an evolutionary one" (48); the triffids stand in for Britain's colonized subjects, who are enacting their revenge on the British mainland. Simultaneously, the text highlights "the connection between colonialism and vegetation" (44), such as that on plantations, by "conflating the exploitation of plants and people" (44). This "dual oppression" (44) is part of the reasoning for the usefulness of the concept of the Plantationocene—though the author does not use this term—as an alternative to the now-ubiquitous Anthropocene (see Mittman 6). Saguaro's chapter, drawing on Donna Haraway and China Miéville, likewise focuses on *The Day of the Triffids*, alongside H. P. Lovecraft's *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936) (also mentioned in George's chapter) and John Boyd's *The Pollinators of Eden* (1969) (also discussed in T.S. Miller's chapter). She describes the monstrous hybridity of the tentacular plants in these works, arguing that the properties of these creatures which invoke such horror for authors like Lovecraft are precisely the ones most generative for the "multi-species efflorescence" (75) for which critics like Haraway advocate. The reference to monstrous hybridity calls back to George's chapter, and in fact resonates throughout much of the volume.

The second stream in the volume, Affinity, includes Brittany Roberts's "Between the Living and the Dead: Vegetal Afterlives in Evgenii Iufit and Vladimir Maslov's *Silver Heads*," T.S. Miller's "Vegetable Love: Desire, Feeling and Sexuality in Botanical Fiction," and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's "Alternative Reproduction: Plant-time and Human/Arboreal Assemblages in Holdstock and Han." This section focuses on narratives that explore "qualities often thought of as solely human from a vegetal perspective" (6). Perhaps the offering with the most unique theoretical focus, Roberts's chapter starts off this section by exploring the connections between Necrorealism and vegetal life through a close reading of the Russian language film *Silver Heads* (1998). She argues that Necrorealism, which developed in the 1970s in opposition to the Soviet state, is intertwined with plants not only because of its origins in forest fistfights, but also because the ideology's embrace of "bare life" was, in a way, an embrace of "becoming-plant." Necrorealists reject rationality, opting instead for irrationality and "living death" (83) as "non-corpses," making it more difficult for them to be interpellated as political subjects of the state. Roberts finds parallels between this "living death" and plant life, both in that they occupy a similar ontology and that

they both "make death visible" (89), and traces these connections, among others, through a close reading of the film.

The next chapter in this section is Miller's, which focuses on vegetal-sexual politics in *The Pollinators of Eden*, Pat Murphy's short story "His Vegetable Wife" (1986), and Ronald Fraser's novel *Flower Phantoms* (1926). Extending Michael Marder's call to consider plant-thinking, Miller argues for a consideration of plant-desiring, and his chosen texts are all ones in which human sexuality encounters and intertwines with that of plants. Miller's masterful chapter is supported by his extensive background researching botanical fiction – and in fact, his "Lives of the Monster Plants: The Revenge of the Vegetable in the Age of Animal Studies" (2012) is referenced numerous times elsewhere in the volume. Importantly, he connects his discussion to feminist theory, arguing that "a teeming site of resistance to the subordination of plants lies in recent feminist discourses" (116). Similarly to Määttä's argument regarding the dual subjugation of colonized bodies and plants, Miller reads in texts like Murphy's, "not merely a metaphor for a woman under patriarchy, rape culture, capitalism and/or colonialism, but also of plants under the hierarchies of being that have historically subordinated them as insensate, disposable, beneath ethical consideration of any kind" (116). Rounding off this section is Cook's chapter on human/arboreal assemblages and temporality. She focuses on readings of Robert Holdstock's *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* (1988) and Han Kang's "The Fruit of My Woman" (1997) and *The Vegetarian* (2007), incorporating Lee Edelman's concept of "reproductive futurism." Each work "plays with plant-time" (132), a temporality that operates differently from human timescales. Cook reads the works as proposing "new hybridized ways of being and becoming human" (129). The chapter perhaps over-ambitiously incorporates discussions of reproduction, sexuality, gender, and sexual violence alongside its discussion of temporality, hybridity, and becoming-plant. Ultimately, it turns to new materialism to argue that human/arboreal assemblages such as those in Han and Holdstock's work can for the basis for a new type of ethics.

The final stream of the book, Accord, incorporates chapters that "trac[e] the hyphen in human-plant relations" (6). It includes Yogi Hale Hendlin's "Sunlight as a Photosynthetic Information Technology: Becoming Plant in Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume*," Graham J. Murphy's "The Question of the Vegetal, the Animal, the Archive in Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz*," Alison Sperling's "Queer Ingestions: Weird and Sporous Bodies in Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction," and Katherine E. Bishop's "The Botanical Ekphrastic and Ecological Relocation." Hendlin's chapter focuses on the connection between plants and scent in *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984). Scent, Hendlin argues through a reading of the novel, is central to plant communication but is "the least attended to of the senses for the contemporary human organism" (151). With more attention paid to this sense, humans can access their "plant aspect" (153), thereby giving greater value to this form of plant-knowing. The strands of analysis in this chapter tend to diverge, and its invocation of magical realism is not contextualized within the volume's focus on science fiction.

Graham J. Murphy's chapter, which focuses on *Queen City Jazz* (1994), will be of particular interest to those wishing to bridge the gap between animal and plant studies, as he argues that

the novel "reinforces the question of the vegetal and the question of the animal as fundamentally the same question because *vegetal* and *animal* are part of a larger organic network that relies upon species reciprocity, an inter-dependency central to the natural world" (180). Murphy deftly weaves together these questions of the vegetal and the animal with an analysis of the archive, particularly in the shadow of techno-utopic infrastructure as registered in the novel's Flower City. He argues that the novel critiques the politics of the archive, which informs cultural frameworks and categories, instead advocating for a kind of posthuman thinking that moves beyond merely categorizing the non-human world in a way parallel to "dead information" (186).

Sperling's chapter focuses on Jeff VanderMeer's "This World is Full of Monsters" (2017), "Corpse Mouth and Spore Nose" (2004), and *The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). Circling back to the (New) Weird, she explores the agential nature of spores as they intersect with and change concepts of human embodiment through Mel Y. Chen's concept of "queer ingestion." The queerness of plants articulated here was hinted at in both Cook's and Miller's chapters. Likewise, Sperling's observation that "many plants' rooted networks of inter-species dependence and communication provide models of living communally and entangled with others" (198) resonates throughout the volume. The collection ends on a high note, with Bishop's chapter on botanical ekphrasis in Algernon Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912), Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Diary of the Rose" (1974) and William Gibson's "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" (1977). Of all the chapters, Bishop's is the one that refers most frequently to other chapters in the volume, which is fitting considering her status as editor. She argues, through a series of excellent close readings, that ekphrasis is "a pedagogical moment in which the reader is informed how to see in step with the dominant ideologies surrounding them" (228-229) but which also allows "the viewer to reject self-perpetuating systems of power by refracting the quotidian" (229). The use of this literary device in speculative fiction, particularly when its gaze is turned on plants, can reveal unexpectedly animated and agential vegetal life.

Plants in Science Fiction, as a whole, argues that "plant life in sf transforms our attitudes towards morality, politics, economics, and cultural life at large, questioning and shifting many traditional parameters" (4-5). Its chapters span numerous themes, countries, and (sub)generic boundaries, making significant strides in addressing the plant blindness that can characterize SF scholarship. In her authoritative introduction, Bishop also articulates the volume's omissions, issuing a call to action for additional explorations of plants in non-Western texts and a variety of other genres (poetry, video games, etc.), as well as of terraforming, plants in space, and plant technology. Nevertheless, the volume as it stands is a much-needed intervention uniting Critical Plant Studies and science fiction studies. As one of the first to stake a claim for the importance of plants in science fiction, it will undoubtedly serve as a touchstone for the exciting work on the topic that is yet to come.

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