Introduction:

Critical Plant Studies

Wendy Woodward and Erika Lemmer

In *The Years, Months, Days* (2017) by Yan Lianke an old man relates obsessively to a plant. He and his blind dog remain in a remote mountain village in China after other inhabitants have left due to famine. Alone with his dog, the nameless man tends a single ear of corn, nurturing the plant in the hope that it will bear fruit which will sustain them both. The fable insists that we relate to the plant, not as a symbolic entity but as the basis for human existence. The old man's desperation recalls Michael K's dependence on agriculture for survival in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1998); the eponymous character's attempts to grow vegetables celebrate agricultural cycles and their bounty, if naively: "All that remains is to live here quietly for the rest of my life, eating food that my own labour has made the earth to yield. All that remains, is to be a tender of the soil" (113).

At a time of ongoing drought in many parts of southern Africa, at a time when the burning of the Amazon forest has reached crisis proportions, paying attention to representations of plants and human-plant inter-connectedness in literature is timeous. The articles in this Special Issue rescue plants from being relegated to insignificant backdrops, a condition referred to as "plant blindness" (Wandersee & Schussler 1999: 2001) or "plant phobia" (Marder 2013). Rather than constituting "absolute otherness" (Hallé in Hall 2011: 5) or holding "second class citizenship" (Pollan), the figuring of plants and trees in these articles emphasises "vegetal life in the theoretical discussions of lifeforms" (Nealon 2016: ii).

Tompkins and Bird's *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973) in its insistence on plant sentience and plant intelligence ushered plants into then current debate, but the effect of this text has not been salutary. Michael Pollan, in "The Intelligent Plant" (2013) which traces the evolution of plant politics, suggests that research on plant awareness was contaminated for a significant period by the negative reception of the text's "legitimate plant science, quack experiments and mystical nature worship".

In our post-humanist era more voices are now calling for respect and care towards plants and for their inclusion as autonomous complex life forms (Lemmer 2017: 59). Hall (2011: x) acknowledges a vegetal turn in the

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Humanities and refers to plants as the "new animals". He advocates the use of terminology such as "biospheric integrity" and "plant personhood" when promoting the interests of non-human communities like plants. Delistraty (2019) also argues in favour of "other non-neurological modes of thought" and holds that the types of learning illustrated by plants to adapt to climate change, can be seen as the ultimate form of intelligence, namely "the ability to reshape their existence in order to survive".

Laist's argument in *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013) that plants play a crucial role in the experience of being human has only recently gained international academic currency with the advent of the transdisciplinary *Critical Plant Studies* which has opened up new ways of reading in relation to plants, trees, crops and how they are imagined. In this Special Issue texts, discoveries and experiences in connection with the African continent, and North America all foreground plant-human relationships in biocultural spheres.

In "A Coffee-Plantation is a Thing that Gets Hold of You And Does Not Let You Go": Plant-Writing in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*" Peter Mortensen reads *Out of Africa* by paying attention to the narrator's love of plants, her commitment to biodiversity and indigenous forests, her focus on the vegetal world. In his reading which addresses the "plant blindness" of postcolonial critics and their humancentric bias Blixen is interpreted as socially astute in relation to indigenous people via the intertwining of the human and the vegetal. The result is a very different interpretation of its author who has been criticised as a colonial with no sensitivity to the native land or people. Mortensen argues, further, that *Out of Africa* in its very literary construction imitates vegetal shapes and the profusion of an African landscape.

Colonialism has long been linked to histories of botany and to the exploitation of indigenous plants. Linde Beer's "'Colonial Botany': Conservationists and Orchid Hunters in Popular Afrikaans Fiction Set in the Congo (DRC) and Central Africa from 1949-1962" critiques representations of the Congo in Afrikaans popular fiction at a particular time in history – the height of Afrikaner nationalism and prior to the independence of many African countries. Beer's article demonstrates how colonial botanising is yet another trope of the genre of popular fiction – ridiculed as the pursuit of English eccentrics desperate for orchids who know nothing of the African environment. Even so, orchids have their own sinister, mesmerising power.

Colonial attachment to garden plants from a Northern hemisphere metropolitan "home" recurs as a marker of colonial rigidity, with indigenous plants spurned. In Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* (1982) Beka's mother, against all environmental logic, nurtures British roses in her working class garden in Belize. Her shift to local flora metonymises her anti-colonial awakening. Southern African gardeners have not been exceptions to this emotional attachment to flora from "home". In this volume Dan Wylie takes cognisance of such an attachment in his reading of John Eppel's work: "'Haunted Still by

Memories': John Eppel's Post-settler Plant Poetic". Like Mortensen, Wylie suggests a textual reinterpretation via a plant-centred appreciation. If Eppel's concern with the natural world in his poetry was criticised as anachronistic and politically regressive, Wylie contends that social and political engagement manifest in the poems if we read them ecocritically.

Gardening is not, of course, an escape from the political as Wylie and Edgell demonstrate. In *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (1984), Yi-Fu Tuan dismisses what he calls "the innocence of gardening" (5) from a more general standpoint. For him, gardening is all about power, about the transformation of a landscape and the cultivation of plants according to the will of the gardener.

From the figuring of plants in literary texts J.L. Marais moves the discussion to a material plant and the discovery of a cycad in an entirely unexpected location: "Eugène N. Marais and the Waterberg Cycad (Encephalartos eugene-maraisii Verdoorn)" argues that far from being underrated as a naturalist that Eugene Marais was given adequate recognition for his scientific discovery of a cycad which was named after him. This discovery necessitates a reappraisal of the negative myth of Eugene N. Marais.

For Wendy Woodward in "Arboreal Being: Encounters with Trees in Recent Southern African Fiction", the connection between humans and trees includes a "growing-with" to borrow Michael Marder's term, a kind of fusion that dispels the separate human self. Trees have been represented in specific South African narratives in spiritual relationships with humans, often by means of indigenous beliefs. Yet this does not prevent trees from being biopolitical subjects even as humans in the narratives become arboreal beings, interconnected with trees in life and in death.

Scott Slovic's interconnection with trees takes us to North America. In "Savouring What Remains of the World's Wilderness" entanglements with trees, mostly pines, are physically challenging. Slovic's engagements with experiential narratives – both his own risky appreciation of trees in a storm and John Muir's even more unsafe embodied relationship with trees – proffer creative interventions. Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" is broadly deployed, although it also refers specifically to the connections between the narrator and the world, and between him and his dog.

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