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REVIEW ESSAYS

Green Shade

Loser Vegetables in *Plant Theory*

KATIE KADUE

A review of Jeffrey T. Nealon, Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). Cited in the text as PT.

The language of flowers, and of plant life in general, is so deeply rooted in our idiom for talking about thinking that we may not even notice when we make a bad botanical pun. We leaf through anthologies; we plant gardens of letters with flowery rhetoric; dendrites in our neurons, we think in trees on a cellular level. Phytological vocabulary has been flourishing in Western thought since the Greeks, for whom to read meant to gather, as one would gather flowers, and to grow meant to grow like a plant.¹

Perhaps in part because of their unremarkable ubiquity, the thoughtless ways in which we use them as static backdrops or flowery ornaments in our mental landscape, plants seem to offer little to warrant serious ethical attention. Indeed, plants don't seem to do much at all. As Jeffrey T. Nealon notes in *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*, it is animals—in particular, charismatic animals—that (who?) have recently earned the sympathy of a growing number of theorists for having been left out of our conception of meaningful life. Taking a cue from influential texts like Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, recent

thinking in the humanities has sought to close the gap between animals and humans in the Western imagination, sometimes as a humbling reminder of our limits, sometimes in hopes that reversing the reputation damage done by humanist thought might save animals from even rougher treatment in the slaughterhouse.

In a methodological echo of the contingent nature of plant pollination,² Nealon has come to plant studies by happy accident. As he explains in his preface, the seeds of the present study were planted during a perusal of a recent MLA conference program, which featured a surprising number of panels devoted to animal studies (one of them including, to Nealon's parenthetical bemusement, a paper on narwhals), and watered with, according to the acknowledgments, a "bourbon-fueled" conversation with academic pals (*PT*, xvii). Nealon's genealogy of *Plant Theory* continues with his rereading *The Order of Things* as part of an investigation into how animal studies might pick up where Foucault left off. There, he reports finding that the Foucauldian conceptualization of biopower in fact already includes animality, if not animals per se, at its very heart: "with the emergence of the human sciences and the birth of biopower, the animal is not excluded or forgotten but quite the opposite: animality is the dominant apparatus for investigating both what life is and what life does" (*PT*, 8). What did fall to the margins of what counted as "life," in Foucault's account, was the vegetable kingdom. And there the idea of *Plant Theory* really began to blossom: could it be, Nealon wondered, that plants, not animals, are the abjected "other" of Western philosophical thought? And what might theories of biopolitics gain by considering the lilies of the emerging field of plant studies?

Thus Nealon embarks on his quest to reconsider the question of life "from the ground up" (*PT*, xv). To this end, *Plant Theory* takes readers on an ecotour through variously dense thickets of theory from Aristotle to Agamben. The book opens with a pointedly raised eyebrow in a preface titled "Plant Theory?" with an implied emphasis on the question mark: if readers think narwhals are absurd objects of critical study, just wait until they hear about switchgrass, among other heretofore overlooked botanical species. Nealon's tone of mock-outrage lets those readers know they wouldn't be alone in their incredulity; plant studies have been met with alarm from leading voices in the

animal studies community, who protest that ignoring the “differences between different forms of life—sunflowers versus bonobos” (*PT*, xi, quoting Cary Wolfe) risks losing the ethical ground animal studies has gained, and that taking seriously the theories that plants feel pain will leave even vegans with no ethical choice but to starve. And this is to say nothing of the herbicidal rage that has met notions of “plant intelligence” in the popular press. Nealon’s strategy for dispelling skepticism of his “obscure-sounding project” (*PT*, ix) seems to involve throwing shade on both his own work and its would-be detractors to let us know that *he* knows this whole intellectual circus—plant-thinking, narwhals, the entire nonhuman world from sunflowers to bonobos, “humanities ‘theory’” (*PT*, 117) itself—is at worst a joke, at best an excuse to drink bourbon with his buddies. Since we’re already playing the game, he seems to say with a wink, more power to the flowers. Nealon’s glibness might be particularly appropriate to plant life, for, after all, the great appeal of both plants and their idioms is how uncomplicated they seem to be, and how straightforward to harvest. As Derrida remarks in a footnote to “White Mythology,” “The metaphor which in the first place is simply encountered in nature needs only to be plucked like a flower.”³

In large part because of this lightness of touch, and in spite of the often heavy and sometimes rigorously treated subject matter (the coda ends with an only half-ironic warning that failing to update the existing biopolitical paradigm is “quite literally a matter of life and death” [*PT*, 122]), the book at times feels less like argument than anthology. The first chapter begins with a rehabilitation of Foucault’s account of biopower in the face of criticism that it has occluded animality. This is paired with a lengthy refutation of Agamben’s attempted correction of Foucault, with a focus on their divergent ideas about how animality fits into biopower, as being obviously inadequate to the biopolitical concerns raised by contemporary consumer capitalism. Chapter 2, a discussion of the role of plants in Aristotle’s and Heidegger’s theories of “life,” lays the groundwork for chapter 3, which traces Derrida’s negotiation in *Glas* of Hegelian animal desire with the queer botany of Genet. The book ends with an attempt to re-root Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, so frequently and loosely used as a metaphor for various features of late capital-

ism, in its original theoretical context to diagnose more accurately the “territory” (*PT*, 105) of biopower and to expose the limits of animal thinking as the only nonhuman mode of inquiry. Although his allegiances are clearly to Foucault, Nealon also explicitly identifies with Deleuze and Guattari as a fellow curious naturalist of the theoretical landscape, and the book’s conclusion gestures in more earnest tones than its opening to the contemporary concerns plant theory may address.

Much like casual curators of herbariums, Nealon collects his textual specimens with the cheerful indifference of a dreamy flower-picker. While his critiques are often withering, they are too superficial to threaten their objects as organic wholes, and despite his self-identification (and qualified success) as a diagnostician, his distracting love of zingers sometimes makes it hard to discern what, exactly, he is diagnosing. Disparaging remarks about the Internet are liberally disseminated throughout the book, as if to provide self-hating social media addicts with a steady crop of sound bites to tweet ironically. One offhand comment grants those who post banal status updates a vegetable-level intelligence, for example, and another judges checking Facebook to be marginally more interesting than watching grass grow. Similarly, Nealon seems less interested in getting to the root of Agamben’s theory of sovereign power than in cutting him down with ruthlessly cheeky mock-paraphrases. He glosses *Homo Sacer*’s description of “a ‘pure, absolute and impassible biopolitical space’ dedicated to ‘total domination,’” for example, with a faux-fascist imperative: “Right now, update your Facebook status to ‘totally dominated’” (*PT*, 16).

But to say that Nealon exploits (some) plants’ sessile, unresisting availability (he does repeatedly bring up the exciting and complicating possibilities of certain poisonous, invasive, parasitic, and carnivorous species) is not exactly a criticism. Plants, in Foucault’s account in *The Order of Things* of “the first birth of biopower,” were once privileged forms of life, appreciated precisely for their superficial availability: the plant, “with all its forms on display, from stem to seed, from root to fruit; with all its secrets made generously visible,” provided “a pure and transparent object for thought as tabulation” (quoted in *PT*, 7). With the epistemic shift from immanence to transcendence that gave the less literally legible interiority of the animal—“its hidden

structures, its buried organs, so many invisible functions” (quoted in *PT*, 8)—its place of priority, the exposed plant was left in the cold, its “secrets” hanging out.

Some of our foremost floral theorists have been drawn to plants, or at least flowers, for this very openness and generosity, which can afford more than opportunities for data collection. For Elaine Scarry, flowers are the consummate figures for imagination, because they are nice enough to fit comfortably between our eyes, and thus provide us with an image of the imagination itself.⁴ At the same time, because vegetal verbiage comes to us so easily, and to such ludic effect, it can be difficult (especially, apparently, for Nealon) to consider plant life, and its intellectual histories, as a serious question—this despite the fact that the stakes of the question are so high, Nealon impishly hints in his preface, he’s losing friends over it (*PT*, xii). Not that Nealon singles plants out for condescension. If anything he is more generous to plants than to people; Agamben and his admirers in particular are mowed down unceremoniously. “In any case” is his preferred, shrugging transition into and out of such mic drops as, in another dismissal of Agamben’s “melodramatic” and anachronistic account of sovereign power, “In any case, there would seem to be important differences between the Luftwaffe and Directv, though both can overwhelm you, unseen from the air” (*PT*, 17).

Part of what makes plant consciousness seem so patently ridiculous is that, while we usually only call people animals as an insult, humans *are* animals—rational, political, zoological—and therefore the distinction between human and nonhuman animals can strike us as only partial. Nealon points out that for Aristotle, who endowed vegetative life-forms with something we can loosely translate as “soul,” “we are also ‘walking plants’” (*PT*, 60)—in the sense that our stomachs function as a kind of internalized, portable soil—but this is not meant unseriously. Blogger James Stanescu, in titling a post responding to Nealon as “Vindication of the Rights of Vegetables,” references the satirical *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* written to exhibit the patent absurdity or, if taken seriously, slippery slope of Mary Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminist *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.⁵ And indeed, the cartoonish nonhumanity of plants, and the incredulous responses of animal studies to the idea of vegetable rights, might

also have something to do with the sister ridiculousness, in Western thought, of women. Nealon mentions without comment Hegel's classification in *Philosophy of Right* of women as plants (PT, 68), but it's a case of phyto-misogyny worth lingering on:

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling. . . . Women are educated—who knows how?—as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. (HV, 12)

Finding none of the epistemological hospitality that Foucault claims plants extend, Hegel considers the secret lives of non-animals to be an unfathomable mystery that's not, come to think of it, really worth much thought—who knows how women or plants do anything? And who cares? Here what eludes empirical knowledge fails to earn the respectful wonder elicited by the unknowability of animal consciousness. For Hegel, anyway, it's mostly just annoying.

Flowers, as suggested by Anne-Lise François's inflection of Scarry's rosier account, are the form of plant life most commonly assigned to women: as short-lived as beauty, as dishonest as whores.⁶ Glossing Scarry's appreciation of flowers' perfectly gaze-sized proportions, François focalizes "the special capacity flowers have not to be special—not to tax but to remain adequate to imaginative powers"; not, in other words, to fix us with the enigmatic stare of Derrida's cat or overwhelm us with the majestic mystery of a lion. The particularly feminized otherness of plants—whether generously given up, irritatingly vague and unformed, or pathetic and disgusting—offers ways of nuancing biopolitical discourse that Nealon, the few times he does mention gender, immediately bulldozes over. If "the common association of flowers with promiscuity, easy availability, whoredom, transience, and commonness itself," or the "long-standing literary association of flowers with deception and illusion, . . . figures of appearance without substance and of veiling with hiding" ("FF"), do not seem especially flattering to flowers, they can perhaps at least take comfort in that it will all be over soon.

In a certain literary tradition, however, plants have transcended

their association with painted or withered women and enjoyed life spans approaching that of a sequoia. A multinational industry in converting women into plants shot up when Renaissance poets, from the Laura-cum-laurel-obsessed Petrarch to the famous vegetable lover Andrew Marvell, began transplanting Ovidian topoi into new soil. In “The Garden,” Marvell contests the idea that mythological figures whose beloveds metamorphosed into plants suffered any loss. On the contrary, Marvell insists, Apollo was just really into trees, and “hunted Daphne so, / Only that she might laurel grow”; Pan, likewise, was only interested in Syrinx for her potential to turn into a reed. Some have read Marvell’s phytophilia as part of a “subversive ecological discourse,” with tree-hugging as a radical alternative to heterosexual sex, a mode of desire that functions within a both literally and figuratively rhizomatic queer ecology.⁷ From the planted woman’s perspective, however, becoming-tree might have more to do, as Barbara Johnson points out, with avoiding rape.⁸ Women in this poetic tradition—and, possibly, in the realm of the aesthetic more generally—are a lot more abject than plants, unless they are lucky enough to become one, or die.

The lines of *Plant Theory*’s inquiry are most fruitful when they ask after how the meaning that subtends certain valued forms of life—human, animal, or, implicitly, male—gets discursively created, or lost. Nealon’s account raises the disquieting possibility that plants have not been excluded from Western metaphysics, but rather included precisely in order to be ignored, in a flagrant performance of the dis-possession of lower life-forms’ claims on meaning. Figures of plants flit in and out of philosophical discourse like quick floral lives, and in his careful tracing of these elisions Nealon is at his best. Noting how Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, uses the example of Cain and Abel to illustrate the foundational role of animal sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian tradition—in Derrida’s words, “politics presupposes livestock”—Nealon reminds us of the other side of the story: the unceremonious rejection of the value of Cain’s vegetable sacrifice, and Derrida’s corresponding lack of interest in this “abjection of plant life” (PT, 51). The meaning of animal sacrifice, and of animal life, thus derives precisely from the meaninglessness of plant life in Genesis and Derrida alike. In Heidegger, plants recede from view less because of their meaninglessness than because of their troubling indetermi-

nacy. After initially including plants in his list of the nonhuman beings of the world—“animals and plants, the material things like the stone”—Heidegger implicitly relegates them to the compost heap, going on to define only the world-relations of “[1.] the stone” (“worldless”) and “[2.] the animal” (“poor in world”). “[1.5] About the plant,” Nealon facetiously adds, “we’re not so sure” (*PT*, 39).

The radical uncertainty posed by the plant, whether ignored by Heidegger or reduced to a riff by Nealon, may be precisely where its critical potential lies. Nealon’s repackaging of Michael Marder’s claim, in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, that plant life requires us to “acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn” into a sloganeering “plants are the new animals” (*PT*, 12) fails to recognize that plants might ask us—or, in their indifference, meaningfully *not* ask us—to think about desire, time, power, and potentiality in ways that are distant not only from animal life but from the trend-driven, recognition-hungry academic world Nealon is so fond of mocking. Acquiring a taste for the concealed and withdrawn, as Marder recommends, could mean something other than discovering *what* is concealed and withdrawn, and then promptly coining a sexy term for it. It could mean, for example, the opposite—simply respecting concealment and leaving it alone—or a reevaluation of concealment and withdrawal as something else, as when François suggests that her *Open Secrets*, in being “a book about literary characters who practice a peculiarly innocent kind of lying or withholding—who lie in the open and hide through appearance, deceiving not by active concealment but by letting appearances tell a certain story and not correcting the misconstructions that may result in the minds of others,” is “a book about flowers” (“FF”).

Nealon is most promising in his speculations about plant theory’s generativity in his coda, where, following a brief discussion of Monsanto’s aggressive control over large swaths of vegetable life and human livelihood, he suggests—qualified with another deflating, gee-whiz “in any case”—that “the mesh of life and neoliberalism at the molecular level is morphing very quickly indeed, and we need a similarly robust biopolitics, one that moves at the level of life itself, to diagnose and respond to it” (*PT*, 113). At least insofar as human life is tied up with nonhuman life—vegetal as well as bacterial, fungal,

and of the more abject animal kingdoms—an attention to how the other 99 percent of the biomass lives would certainly seem integral to a more vibrant and more sustainable understanding of biopower.

What doesn't come through in Nealon's book, however, is how biopower is not "literally," or not only literally, "a matter of life and death" (*PT*, 122), but is also a question of the imagination. As François puts it, exposing Monsanto boosters' dream of an unimaginably productive agricultural future as precisely an index of their limited imagination, "nothing may be less free, less imaginative, than the tirelessly familiar goals of profit and power fueling the biotechnology corporations that promise to set us free."⁹ Looking to Wordsworth for the "far more radical change" needed to imagine a future with real possibilities, precisely a future cultivated through the supposedly retrograde, Romantic desire to return to the vegetative states of the past, François reminds us that new technologies don't have "a monopoly on virtuality": "aesthetic experience has long yielded an awareness of fugitive, unmaterialized presences and possibilities" embedded within the material world ("OH," 55). The microscopic nodes of resistance to the all-consuming, possibility-erasing logic of industrial agriculture that François is able to locate through her readings of poetry model the slowed-down rhythm of thought that Nealon claims to be interested in, even if this potential remains unrealized in the quick clip of quips in *Plant Theory*. Nealon is right that the questions facing theories of biopower are urgent, and we wouldn't want our vegetable theory to grow more slowly than the vast empires it's up against. But that might mean, as Marder has suggested in *Plant-Thinking*, that we need a theory that is not "more robust" (*PT*, xv), but weaker,¹⁰ and that values breathing in ideas as much as acquiring knowledge.

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Notes

1. λέγειν (like the Latin *legere*), to pick up and collect (whether in oral production or in reading); φύειν, to bring forth or shoot up, a word with roots in the vegetable world but extended to refer to human development.

2. As botanist Jean-Marie Pelt puts it: "In the work of pollination, nature is not particular; it trusts chance, neglects, squanders." Quoted in Claudette Sartiliot, *Herbarium Verbarium: The Discourse of Flowers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 33. Hereafter cited as *HV*.
3. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 19.
4. Joanna Picciotto remarks that, while Scarry reserves these powers for flowers, Milton finds them in less obvious, and less literally visually available, botanical sites, like creeping vines. *Labor of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 478.
5. James K. Stanesco, "Vindication of the Rights of Vegetables, or, Plant Theory and Planted Theory," *Critical Animal* (blog), Blogspot, November 3, 2015, <http://criticalanimal.blogspot.com/2015/11/vindication-of-rights-of-vegetables-or.html>.
6. François quotes Bataille, who is fine with leaves because they "age honestly," expressing disgust for the lack of grace with which flowers capitulate to the passage of time: they "wither like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously." Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," quoted in François, "Flower Fisting," *Postmodern Culture* 22, no. 1 (September 2011), https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v022/22.1.francois.html. Hereafter cited as "FF."
7. Marjorie Swann, "Vegetable Love: Botany and Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century England," in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 153.
8. Barbara Johnson, "Muteness Envy," in *Human All Too Human*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1995), 341-42.
9. Anne-Lise François, "'O Happy Living Things!': Frankenfoods and the Bounds of Wordsworthian Natural Piety," *diacritics* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 42-70; 49. Hereafter cited as "OH."
10. As Marder defines it in his introduction, "Weak thought resists the tyranny of 'objective' factuality and welcomes a multiplicity of interpretations, even as it takes the side of the victims of historical and metaphysical brutality." *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.