

Conference Report on “Vegetal Poetics: Narrating Plants in Culture and History”

International Conference of the Literary and Cultural Plant Studies Network in cooperation with the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, June 6-8, 2019, Dresden, Germany

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“Vegetal Poetics: Narrating Plants in Culture and History” was the title of the first conference of the interdisciplinary Literary and Cultural Plant Studies Network founded in 2016. Organized by JOELA JACOBS (University of Arizona, Tucson), SOLVEJG NITZKE (Technical University Dresden), and ISABEL KRANZ (University of Vienna), the international event explored the roles, functions, and agencies of plants in various literary and cultural contexts. The conference took place at the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, Germany, in the context of the exhibition “Of Plants and People: A Stroll Around the Green Planet.”



As an introduction to the topic, the conference speakers were invited on a

Figure 1: Start of the exhibit's tour: Renée Sintenis' *Daphne* (1930) foreshadowed the wide scope of topics in the conference program, ranging from gendered associations with plants to classical poetics. © Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden.

guided tour through the exhibit which combines biological perspectives on plants with the manifold cultural meanings of the vegetal throughout history.

In their welcome address, JOELA JACOBS, SOLVEJG NITZKE, and ISABEL KRANZ emphasized that plants are not only decorative or useful, but that they can become cultural agents and poetic forces. The hosts formulated the conference's threefold goals: 1) to further interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration in the budding field of Plant Studies, 2) to discuss its theories and terminologies and its relationship to the neighboring field of Animal Studies, and 3) to rethink central concepts in the Environmental Humanities, such as the Anthropocene or the

nature/culture divide by specifically looking at plants. The eighteen conference talks, despite their great variety, all shared a focus on poetics. In that spirit, the conference was accompanied by two poetry readings that were open to the public: 2018 Nature Writing Prize winners Sabine Scho and Christian Lehnert presented their work during consecutive evening events with the joint title “Narrating Plants – Plants between Science and Poetry” and engaged in lively discussion with the three co-hosts and the audience.

Panel I: Political Gardens

The first conference panel focused on political perspectives in the intradiegetic gardens of the Antiguan-American novelist Jamaica Kincaid and the American poet Emily Dickinson. ANDRÉE-ANNE KEKEH-DIKA’s (University of Paris 8) talk, entitled “Jamaica Kincaid’s Writings, or the Possibilities of ‘Green,’” analyzed Kincaid’s “My Garden (Book)” (1999) and “My Favorite Plant” (1999). By ‘grafting’ parts of one book into the other, Kincaid puts botanical techniques into textual practice. KEKEH-DIKA traced the polysemous signatures of ‘green’ in Kincaid’s writings to show topological considerations about framing new milieus that are related to notions of the subaltern in the context of the author’s native island. Subsequently, CHRISTINE GERHARDT (University of Bamberg) spoke about “‘My Jungle Fronts on Wall Street’: The Plant Politics of Emily Dickinson’s Exotic Gardens.” Dickinson cared for the family garden, kept an herbarium, and read about garden variety. In this respect, the poet is characteristic for nineteenth-century interests in nature, garden poetry, and exotic plants. GERHARDT proposed that the gendered expectations and economic inequality of Dickinson’s era were negotiated via the notion of ‘the exotic,’ a term that dictionaries of the time define as ‘as in plants.’ In a close reading of the poem “I Tend My Flowers For Thee,” GERHARDT demonstrated that Dickinson’s gardens showcase dynamic gendered structures. Both talks of the first panel emphasized the importance of vegetal networks of metaphoricity and intertextuality in vegetal poetics.

Panel II: Plant Potentials

The second panel featured presentations by HELGA BRAUNBECK (North Carolina State University, Raleigh) and EVA AXER (Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research Berlin),



Figure 2: The End of Mark Twain Log. Photograph, ca. 1892, Camp Badger, Tulare County, California. © Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

who discussed potentials and forces embodied in plants. HELGA BRAUNBECK's presentation "Writing Trees and Chasing Spirits: Marion Poschmann's and Esther Kinsky's Third Nature Poetics" focused on novels written by the two contemporary German authors. Both challenge traditional ways of Nature Writing by developing a new German Nature Writing that considers nature an aesthetic force. Referring to Steffen Richter's concept of "Third Nature," Gilles Clément's "Third Landscape," and Michel Foucault's "Heterotopy," BRAUNBECK analyzed hybrid ecosystems that are defined by anthropogenic change. Poschmann's and Kinsky's works both depict Third Nature in a way that draws attention to plants and animals in nature/culture

spaces of urban edgelands and rural landscapes that appear wounded and damaged. Next, EVA AXER analyzed works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Günther Müller, and Richard Powers in her talk on "Metamorphosis of Plants 2.0: Exploring the Time Scale of Literary Narratives and the 'Deep Time' of Plants." First, AXER took a closer look at Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) and examined how Goethe writes about the temporalization of nature. Then, she showed the ways in which 1940s thinking about nature was informed by Goethe's ideas, specifically in Günther Müller's *Morphological Poetics*, which transfers organic terms into literary theory. Lastly, AXER turned to the deep time of trees in Richard Power's novel *The Overstory* (2018) and demonstrated how intradiegetic, non-linear temporality and narrative structure relate to each other. Both talks shared the view that plants in literature can help us understand abstract notions like time and space in different ways.

Panel III: Literary Botany

The third panel addressed the meaning of botanical knowledge in the production and theorization of literature. RACHEL BOUVET (University of Quebec at Montreal), who delivered a talk about a collaborative research project, *The Botanical Imagery* with STEPHANIE POSTHUMUS (McGill University, Montreal), showed how literary studies benefit from an engagement with botanical knowledge (giving the example of botanist Francis Hallé) and theories of space, ecopoetics, and geopoetics (a term coined by Kenneth White). BOUVET illustrated the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach with a close reading of Estonian writer Katrina Kalda's novel *Le Pays où les arbres n'ont pas d'ombre* ("The Country Where Trees Have No Shadow," 2016). Afterward, OLIVER VÖLKER (Goethe University Frankfurt) spoke about "Intricate Plants and Figures of Growth in Alfred Döblin's Writings." With the help of Döblin's philosophical essay *Our Existence* (1933) and the short story *The Murder of a Buttercup* (1912), VÖLKER demonstrated the importance of vegetal life and metaphors of fluidity, especially in Döblin's early work. Focusing on Döblin's voluminous modernist novel *Mountains Seas and Giants* (1924), VÖLKER showed how the novel employs imaginative ways of vegetal world-making in the sense of *poiesis*, and how, by doing so, it undermines traditional principles of prose writing. Both talks in panel III made evident that literature has the potential to endow ideas from the natural sciences with unlimited imaginative possibilities.

Panel IV: Arboreal Poetics

PATRÍCIA VIEIRA (University of Coimbra) and SUSAN MCHUGH (University of New England, Biddeford) represented two of the many projects about trees that were sent in response to the Call for Papers. In her talk about "The Amazonian Rainforest in Literature, Cinema and Art," PATRÍCIA VIEIRA first introduced her concept of *phytographia*, which describes how plants inscribe themselves into other media. In developing this theory, she drew on Jakob Böhme's *Signatura Rerum*, Walter Benjamin's language philosophy, and Jacques Derrida's *archi-écriture*.

As examples, VIEIRA analyzed works about the Amazonian rainforest, namely Rómulo Gallegos' novel *Canaima* (1935), Ciro Guerra's film *El abrazo de la serpiente* (2015), and Frans Krajcberg's sculptures. The panel's second talk was given by SUSAN MCHUGH and entitled "Forest Thinking in Contemporary Environmentalist Film and Fiction." In order to demonstrate that contemporary environmentalist fiction primarily calls for action to save ecosystems and focuses on interspecies relationships, she analyzed Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novels and aspects of Richard Power's recent novel *The Overstory* as well as two documentaries directed by Patrick Rouxel: *Green* (2009) and *Alma* (2010). Building on her research in animal studies, MCHUGH examined how tree perspectives are established and realized via language in *The Overstory* and via a visual vocabulary in the films. Both talks showed, among other things, how artists, authors, and film directors mediate the perception of trees, forests, and their relationship to the human world.



Figure 3: Kliffküste 01 (from the series Woodlands), C-Print, 2015. Courtesy Mat Hennek. © Mat Hennek.

Panel V: Vegetal Temporalities



Figure 4: Robert Barrett's talk, showing "the Cross, a scion of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that will ultimately be transformed into a rootstock for Jesus's own grafting." © Joela Jacobs

KLARA SCHUBENZ (University of Mainz) and ROBERT BARRETT (University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign) talked not only about vegetal temporalities, but also presented more expansive historical perspectives: KLARA SCHUBENZ spoke "On Stifter's 'Law of Gradualness,'" referring to nineteenth-century Austrian author Adalbert Stifter. Stifter's novel *Witiko* (1867) tracks the history of the Vítkovci, a Bohemian dynasty. SCHUBENZ explained the Romantic legacy of the German forest as a poetic place, but also as a location of tree theft and murder in the woods with the help of this text. She showed Stifter's interest in the dichotomy of nature and culture and also offered

a political reading of the novel: When the forest is decoded as a symbol for the aristocratic order of Austria-Hungary, saving and caring for old forests becomes a political commentary on conservation. The subsequent talk by ROBERT BARRETT, entitled “The Vegetal Temporality of Medieval British Drama,” brought together, *inter alia*, biblical plants like the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (fig. 4) and Jesus, who embodies both the fruit of Mary’s womb and the metaphorical vine. In his analyses, BARRETT focused on medieval English plays, for example the Chester’s *Shepherds’ Play*, that present a concurrence of past, present, and future in salvation history. Tracing the teleological and typological relations in the plays, BARRETT pointed out the vegetal imagery that is used to represent the play’s intradiegetic time: These vegetal understandings of time map onto the liturgical cycle throughout the year, which connects the vegetal to the sacred. Both talks of the fifth panel showed the importance of plant time in literature and culture throughout European history.

Panel VI: Vegetal Agencies

The talks of the sixth panel shared an agency-oriented approach: GIULIA PACINI’s (College of William and Mary, Williamsburg) presentation, entitled “Saving the Body Politic: Ensuring the Flow of Tree Sap in French Revolutionary Discourse,” explored the meaning of trees and arboreal representations for the French body politic in the eighteenth century. A metaphor already, the French body politic was described with the help of other metaphors and allegories for living bodies, particularly trees, which embodied the new nation’s hopes. The trees’ popularity was evident in the many historical examples, which also went beyond the metaphorical: Through expansive tree planting campaigns, the French had real trees embody the metaphorical meanings within their body politic. Focusing in particular on references to tree sap, PACINI outlined that the vegetal fluid was an especially productive trope among others, such as pruning, grafting and felling. RAGNILD LOME (Linköping University) also examined vegetal agencies in her talk about “Imaginations of Plant Agency in the 1950s and 60s: Readings of the Short Story *Trapperne* by Cecil Bødker and the Radio Play *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham.” *The Day of the Triffids* presents a dystopian scenario: The plot points to the challenges of the newly developing discipline of cybernetics during the Cold War and negotiates the boundaries between nature and culture by giving plants the upper hand over humans. Humans and triffids seem to align regarding their abilities, but the latter are successful, even without having any kind of ‘civilization’ – they become similar to humans, but

stay alien at the same time. The short story *Trapperne* from the collection *Øjet* (1961) by the Danish author Cecil Bødker also shows plants as something alien in a sterile world, thus reminding the human protagonist of the complexity of life. Both talks showed that ideas about collective agencies lend themselves particularly well to imaginations of the vegetal.

Panel VII: Plant Bodies

The seventh panel addressed the vegetal material and its relation to anatomy. ALESSANDRO BUCCHERI's (LabEx haStec/Centre Jean Pépin, Paris) presentation, "Talking about Plants in

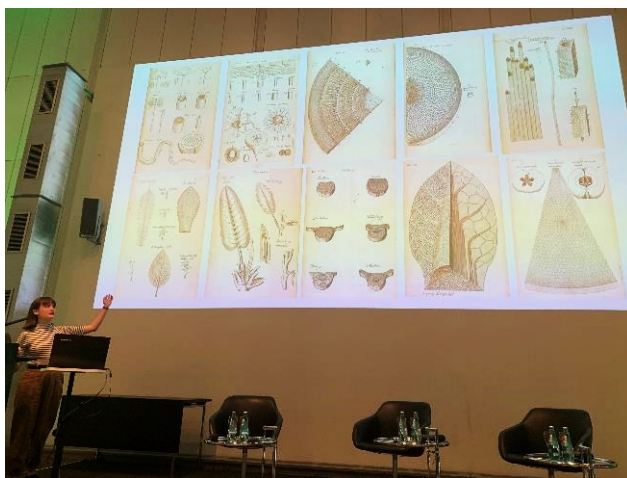


Figure 5: Pamela MacKenzie's talk, showing illustrations from Nehemiah Grew's *Anatomy of Plants*: He prepared many drawings of minute plant details and described his observations with metaphors like a "woven texture" for cellular structures and likened it to lacework in order to connect the new discoveries to his everyday reality. © Joela Jacobs

Ancient Greek Poetry and Medicine: A Dialogue between Homer and Hippocrates," proceeded in three steps: First, he introduced the audience to the meaning of plants in ancient Greek culture, especially in medicine. A look at Homer's *Illiad* illustrated that plants often represented human affairs, such as in the abduction of Persephone or Narcissus' vanity. Second, the talk pursued specific plants in ancient literature and showed how the poets inspired scholars to depict medicinal topics

through plants. In his final step, BUCCHERI pointed out analogies between the four humors and vegetal sap with the help of Hippocrates' *On the Development of the Child*. PAMELA MACKENZIE (University of British Columbia, Vancouver) presented a microscopic view of the vegetal body in her paper on the "The Hand, the Eye, the Microscope and the Knife in Nehemiah Grew's *Anatomy of Plants* (1682)." The Early Modern anatomist and physiologist utilized the new technology of the microscope in order to understand how plants function on a cellular level. The two talks worked together particularly well because they viewed the human and the vegetal body from two opposite but complementary directions: Ancient medical literature looked at the human body through the lens of vegetal anatomy, whereas Nehemiah Grew used human art practices and anatomy in order to explain vegetal cells and their microscopic structures.

Panel VIII: Romantic Plants

In his talk “Vegetal Life, Vegetal Poetics, and Goethe’s *Novella*,” MICHAEL BIES (Free University Berlin) returned the conference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s approach to vegetal life. He showed how the perspective on plants changed in the context of ‘life’ as a concept of intellectual inquiry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: Plants had been regarded as objects of knowledge for a long time, but with the increasing interest in the knowledge of ‘life,’ vegetal life began to be recognized for its particularities. BIES illustrated different approaches to answering the question ‘What is vegetal life?:’ First, Johann Gottfried Herder’s response, who considered plants infant-like, then Goethe’s, who was, among other things, interested in sap as a humoral liquid, and finally Franz Joseph Schelver’s answer, inspired by Goethe, which transferred botanical findings to human medicine. The talk concluded with a reading of *Novella* (1828), which Goethe himself called “a green plant shooting up from its root, thrusting forth strong green leaves from the sides of its sturdy stem, and at last terminating in a flower.”

Panel IX: Plant Palpations



Figure 6: MAYER-SCHWIEGER also introduced the German nineteenth-century botanist Julius Sachs, who designed an instrument that measures plant movements in his pursuit of plant physiology. This auxanometer records vegetal growth in a way that has the plant itself write its record and determines the economic meaning of vegetal growth and agro-economy. © Joela Jacobs

Climbing Plants.” Starting with Charles Darwin’s interest in climbing plants, she guided the audience toward the meaning of *phytotaxis*, which draws on *phototaxis*, the movement of

The final panel played on different meanings of getting in touch with plants: JANA KITTELMANN (University Halle-Wittenberg) presented on “Amor unit plantas’: Plants as Actors in 18th Century Idyll and Love Poetry” and showed how botanical practices like grafting are transferred onto literary methods like citing and copying. Analyzing poems by Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, Karl Wilhelm Ramler, and Franz Alexander von Kleist, KITTELMANN showed how plants appear in the erotic imaginary of Anacreontic poetry. In the final talk, MAREN MAYER-SCHWIEGER (Leuphana University, Lüneburg) spoke about “Phytotaxis: Getting in Touch with

plants toward light, and can be understood as the knowledge of or held by plants. The two talks of the final panel presented forms of ‘vegetal poiesis’ rather than vegetal poetics and therefore contributed to defining these new concepts and terms more closely.

Conclusion

Throughout the conference, the focus on the role of plants in literature and culture sparked many fruitful discussions: The speakers illuminated a wide range of vegetal poetics, and in their concluding remarks, the three co-hosts invited ideas for future collaborations in the field of Plant Studies. One outcome of the subsequent interactive audience discussion was the decision to publish conference proceedings. A plant handbook, called *Pflanzen: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch*, edited by ISABEL KRANZ and JOELA JACOBS for Metzler publishing house, is forthcoming in 2022. JOELA JACOBS and ISABEL KRANZ also co-edited and introduced a German-English special issue of the bilingual journal *Literatur für Leser* about the literary life of plants that focuses on the poetics of the botanical, which was published in August 2019. The three co-hosts also gave brief overviews of their current research, which included ISABEL KRANZ’ work on the form and function of flowers in and as language, SOLVEJG NITZKE’s projects on precarious nature, ecocriticism, and vegetal world-making, and JOELA JACOBS’ conceptualization of vegetal eroti-cism and vegetal violence as forms of phytopoetics. They emphasized that everyone is welcome and invited to connect with the digital platform and the listserv of the Literary and Cultural Plant Studies Network.



Figure 7: The co-hosts Joela Jacobs, Isabel Kranz, and Solvejg Nitzke stressed the importance of working on the specific terminology and theory of the field, and the planned conference volume will be a next step in contributing to this goal.

Program

Guided tour through the exhibit “Of Plants and People. A Stroll Around Our Green Planet” with curator Kathrin Meyer

Welcome Address (Joela Jacobs, Isabel Kranz, and Solvejg Nitzke)

Panel I: Political Gardens

Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika (University of Paris 8): “Jamaica Kincaid’s Writings, or the Possibilities of ‘Green’”

Christine Gerhardt (University of Bamberg): “‘My Jungle Fronts on Wall Street’: The Plant Politics of Emily Dickinson’s Exotic Gardens”

Panel II: Plant Potentials

Helga Braunbeck (North Carolina State University): “Writing Trees and Chasing Spirits: Marion Poschmann’s and Esther Kinsky’s Third Nature Poetics”

Eva Axer (Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research): “*Metamorphosis of Plants 2.0*: Exploring the Time Scale of Literary Narratives and the ‘Deep Time’ of Plants”

Reading and Discussion

Sabine Scho: “Pflanzen erzählen – Pflanzen zwischen Wissenschaft und Dichtung, pt. I” with Solvejg Nitzke, Isabel Kranz, and Joela Jacobs

Panel III: Literary Botany

Rachel Bouvet (University of Quebec at Montreal) and Stephanie Posthumus (McGill University): “The Botanical Imaginary”

Oliver Völker (Goethe University Frankfurt): “Intricate Plants and Figures of Growth in Alfred Döblin’s Writings”

Panel IV: Arboreal Poetics

Patrícia Vieira (University of Coimbra): “The Amazonian Rainforest in Literature, Cinema and Art”

Susan McHugh (University of New England): “Forest Thinking in Contemporary Environmentalist Film and Fiction”

Panel V: Vegetal Temporalities

Klara Schubenz (University of Mainz): “On Stifter’s ‘Law of Gradualness’”

Robert Barrett (University of Illinois): “The Vegetal Temporality of Medieval British Drama”

Panel VI: Vegetal Agencies

Giulia Pacini (College of William and Mary): “Saving the Body Politic: Ensuring the Flow of Tree Sap in French Revolutionary Discourse”

Ragnild Lome (Linköping University): “Imaginations of Plant Agency in the 1950s and 60s: Readings of the Short Story *Trapperne* by Cecil Bødker and the Radio Play *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham”

Reading and Discussion

Christian Lehnert: “Narrating Plants – Plants between Science and Poetry, pt. II” with Solvejg Nitzke, Isabel Kranz, and Joela Jacobs

Panel VII: Plant Bodies

Alessandro Buccheri (LabEx haStec/Centre Jean Pépin): “Talking about Plants in Ancient Greek Poetry and Medicine: A Dialogue between Homer and Hippocrates”

Pamela MacKenzie (University of British Columbia): “The Hand, the Eye, the Microscope and the Knife in Nehemiah Grew’s *Anatomy of Plants*” (1682)

Panel VIII: Romantic Plants

Anke Kramer (University of Siegen): “Dynamic Plants in Tieck’s *Phantasmus*” (cancelled)

Michael Bies (Free University Berlin): “Vegetal Life, Vegetal Poetics, and Goethe’s *Novella*”

Panel IX: Plant Palpations

Jana Kittelmann (University Halle-Wittenberg): “‘Amor unit plantas’: Plants as Actors in 18th-Century Idyll and Love Poetry”

Maren Mayer-Schwieger (Leuphana University Lüneburg): “Phytotaxis: Getting in Touch with Climbing Plants”

Concluding Remarks

Joela Jacobs, Isabel Kranz, and Sovejg Nitzke