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Vegetal politics: belonging, practices and places

Abstract

Cultural geography has a long and proud tradition of research into human-plant relations. However, until recently, that tradition has been somewhat disconnected from conceptual advances in the social sciences, even those to which cultural geographers have made significant contributions. With a number of important exceptions, plant studies have been less explicitly part of more-than-human geographies than have animal studies. This special issue aims to redress this gap, recognising plants and their multiple engagements with and beyond humans. Plants are not only fundamental to human survival, they play a key role in many of the most important environmental political issues of the century, including biofuels, carbon economies and food security. In this introduction, we explore themes of belonging, practices and places, as discussed in the contributing papers. Together, the papers suggest new kinds of 'vegetal politics', documenting both collaborative and conflictual relations between humans, plants and others. They open up new spaces of political action and subjectivity, challenging political frames that are confined to humans. The papers also raise methodological questions and challenges for future research. This special issue grew out of sessions we organised at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in New York in 2012.

Keywords

practices, politics, belonging, vegetal, places

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Editorial for *Social and Cultural Geography* special issue

Vegetal Politics: belonging, practices and places

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The Forty Mile Scrub National Park in Far North Queensland offers a quick morning tea stop for travellers heading west toward the more popular Undara Volcanic National Park. If you have five minutes to spare, the 300m walking track loop through the scrub is signed with points of interest. Jenny and PhD student Steph stopped here when heading west from Cairns in search of Rubber Vine (as part of the AUSCCER research project ‘The Social Life of Invasive Plants’). They found Bottle Trees, White Cedars and Burdekin Plums.

The ‘scrub’ – dry rainforest or semi-evergreen vine thicket, is described in the signage as distinctly different to the lush coastal rainforests. Lower and more variable annual rainfall, combined with the hotter temperatures inland, limit and confine the distribution of rainforest species to small mineral rich basaltic soil patches - patches of rainforest in a sea of eucalypt savanna.

Some time ago, they learned, a seed, an interloper, survived and grew. ‘Out of place!’ (Figure 1). This tree now stands as a mature narrow-leaved iron bark in the middle of the rainforest.

¹ The special issue was developed whilst Buckingham was at the University of Oxford, UK

What does it mean for a tree to be ‘out of place’? Can a gum tree be out of place in Australia? Where does this plant belong?

Plant distributions are governed by tolerances, competition, disturbance and people. Life is possible for different species across water, mineral and temperature gradients. Life must also contend with fire regimes, herbivory, competition and so on. If a seed sprouts and a plant grows to maturity, it is tolerant of the conditions. If it survives and reproduces, it is ‘fit’. Plants assemble themselves amongst and in the thick of things. How then can this tree or indeed any plant – life becoming through relations, exchanging gases with the atmosphere, feeding and sheltering inhabitants, rooted firmly in the ground – be out of place? Fit, but not fitting?

The rainforest savanna boundary is not a line marked in the sand. There is a transition zone, there are thicker and thinner edges. Disturbance and gaps in the canopy come and go, creating momentary opportunity for some. These zones of belonging change through space, and time.

No Rubber Vine in sight, Jenny and Steph ventured further into the scrub beyond the walking track. Instead, they found a different invasive species and Weed of National Significance – *Lantana camara*; thick, scratchy, impenetrable, rising over their heads and covered in ripening black berries. Other signs drew attention to the threat this intruder posed in the National Park, but its ongoing presence seemed an implicit acknowledgement of the stretched resources that make weed control in Northern Australia an impossible task. Wary of ticks, they headed out, feeling a bit out of place themselves.

This anecdote encapsulates the themes of this special issue. The framing of particular plants as belonging or not in certain places is a culturally variable practice that pays only partial attention to the exuberance of planty life. Neither practices nor politics are understood here as purely human affairs, rather people, plants and many others are entangled in ways that both enhance and constrain each other’s lives.

Research into human-plant relations has a long and proud history in cultural geography and related disciplines, for example in the work of Carl Sauer (1952). Since Muir and Theureau and the founding fathers of Western environmentalism articulated ‘wilderness,’ it has become apparent that ‘landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination

projected onto wood and water and rock' (Schama 1995 p. 61). As Crosby (1986) noted in *Ecological Imperialism*, plants and our relationship to them are literally rooted in culture and history. In both rural and urban spaces plants are allocated places, becoming weeds when they have 'contempt for boundaries' (Mabey 2010 pg 82). As plants move across time and space they become 'aliens', 'invaders' or 'weeds' in their new territories. The European domestication of landscapes has been widely articulated (Glacken 1967; Miller and Reill 1996; Thompson 2010), yet the relationality of plants occupying new landscapes and identities – what we think of as a 'vegetative cosmopolitanism' of plants -- has yet to be given adequate attention.

The cultural landscapes tradition of considering human-plant relations has until recently been disconnected from conceptual advances in the social sciences, albeit cultural geographers have been at the forefront of those conceptual advances. Geographers and others have contested human exceptionalism and have used this to rethink nature-society relations, human identity, and ethical engagement (Anderson 1997, 2008, Emel et al. 2002, Haraway 2008; Whatmore 2002). The other-than-humans receiving most of the attention, however, have been animals.

The themes developed by such animal geographies have dominated, and arguably come to stand for, more-than-human geographies. Expanding our empirical investigations can bring us in new directions conceptually. Contributors to this collection join scholars attempting to go beyond 'intuitive and benign encounters between stable, coherent, and large mammals' (Lorimer and Davies 2010, 32), scholars who consider viruses, mosquitoes, bacteria (Hird 2010), and the indifferent earth itself (Clark 2011). Our aim with this special issue is to redress this gap, pushing our thinking to not only include but recognise plants and their multiple engagements with and beyond humans.

The concerns of this special issue are shared across a number of disciplines, and we hope this collection will advance cross-disciplinary conversations. In botany, philosophy and other parts of the humanities a body of research now makes the case for plants to be engaged with as subjects, rather than objects (Hall 2011, Marder 2011a and b, Ryan 2011, Marder 2012, Gagliano et al. 2014). A somewhat parallel conversation has been happening in anthropology. Notwithstanding its rich heritage of ethnographic study of the ways human societies engage with and conceptualise plants (Rival 1998; Nazarea 2006; Geissler and Prince 2009; Mosko 2009), multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) now attempts to recognise

the plants themselves, along with other nonhumans, as key players. Urban ecology and biogeography well recognise the plant worlds that our authors have approached, from a different direction (Pickett et al. 2011).

Indeed if cultural geography is here putting more plants into its analyses, biogeography and ecology have recently been getting better at putting people into theirs, for example through the concepts of anthropogenic biomes (or anthromes) (Ellis and Ramankutty 2008) and novel ecosystems (Hobbs et al. 2006, 2013). The profound transformations and future uncertainties in the landscapes of the Anthropocene require such consideration (Lorimer 2012), and many of the signature challenges of the Anthropocene – invasives, food security, biodiversity conservation, species migrations – require the best possible understanding of human-plant relations.

The papers in this issue started life at a series of sessions we organised at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in New York in 2012. In organizing these sessions, we were aware that although the agency of plants has been increasingly demonstrated in contexts that include trees (Jones and Cloke 2002), gardens (Hitchings 2003, 2007; Power 2005), invasion (Barker 2008; Ginn 2008; Atchison and Head 2013), crops (Head et al. 2012) and seeds (Phillips 2013), scholars had yet to fully respond, for plants, to Lulka's (2009) call to attend more carefully to the details of nonhuman difference (Head and Atchison 2009). Lulka argued that there is a residual humanism in the use of the hybridity concept when 'nonhumans' are lumped as a singular entity. He insisted, instead, that what was required was a 'thick hybridity' in which an adequate sense of difference is maintained. Attention to the specific capacities of plants is important to understand the specifics of relationality and distributed agency in human-plant encounters; that categories and configurations of human entanglement with the nonhuman world are not pre-existing givens, but become and are worked out in a process of relation. Such relations occur across – indeed help constitute – different scales of space and time (Crosby 1986, Buckingham et al. 2013). However plants are profoundly backgrounded in most of Western thought and life, and approaching human-plant encounters requires particular methodological sensitivities to their invisibility.

We were also conscious that, more than a decade after Jones and Cloke's (2002, 2008) important study of trees, their (2002: 4) comment that, while there had been considerable recent interest in animals and society, 'flora ... remains an even more ghost-like presence in contemporary theoretical approaches', remained pertinent. And yet, as Patricia Pellegrini and

Sandrine Baudry (2014) show in their beautifully illustrated paper herein, many plants come ‘unbidden’ into the cracks of our lives. Collectively, these papers show that attending to human-plant relations provides new insights into and framings of the political, and helps to rethink what it means to live with plants. Three of the papers take issue with the idea of cities as being somehow against nature, offering new ideas about what it means to be urban. The papers also provide fresh perspectives on questions of agency, identity, mobility, boundaries, place-making and ethics; they take themes that have well-established literatures oriented around humans and explore them through empirics of humans and plants working together, each paper pointing out new insights and applications for an agenda of rethinking human-plant geographies.

Pellegrini and Baudry’s study of street flora in Paris and Montpellier, France, provides interesting historical perspectives and important insights into the challenges of greening the densely packed cities of the future. They show for example how street level flower boxes have been used to constrain public behaviour deemed inappropriate. These authors go well beyond consideration of ‘greening’ as a planning concept meant to enhance urban liveability. Arguing that ‘cities can create their own flora’, the authors also recognise more co-production of plants and cities. On the one hand, they illustrate, with an eye for ordinary, informal spaces, the important role of ‘unbidden flora’ in urban places. On the other, they show how urbanised plants, some of them extremely tough, do not fit the dichotomised categories of wild or cultivated, but instead become ‘active agents’ in the making of the streets.

Melissa Poe, Joyce LeCompte, Rebecca McLain and Patrick Hurley (2014) focus on urban foraging for plants and mushrooms in Seattle, USA. Using a relational political ecology approach, they identify three constituent subfields of the concept of belonging – cultural belonging and identity, belonging and place, and belonging and more-than-human agency. They show how some plant practices are authorised by environmental managers as belonging, specifically native plant restoration and indigenous *historical* ethnobotany. Others are ‘written out’ as not belonging in the city; contemporary urban foraging (by indigenous and non-indigenous people), some plant species, and other so-called rural activities. Bringing a political lens onto multispecies assemblages, this paper shows how urban nature provides ‘ripe spaces’ for analysis, opening up ‘imaginative possibilities for alternative politics grounded in an ethical caring of and for “significant otherness”’. It also joins the growing body of literature emphasising the importance of biocultural diversity.

Darren Patrick's (2014) paper analyses New York City's High Line as a place where human sexuality, plant agency, and shared geographies literally and figuratively entangle in suggestive ways. He considers the multiple displacements involved in the gentrification project; the 'unruly actor' *Ailanthus altissima* (Tree of Heaven), whose ecological success is dependent on the continual anthropogenic production of waste spaces, as well as queer actors and actions who do not fit the dominant white and wealthy homonormativity involved in the gentrification. Patrick presses an agenda for a queered urban ecology that links discourse, subjectivity, and ecology, and that considers what displacements are involved in spatial orderings – heteronatural or otherwise.

Jeremy Brice (2014) focuses on the agency of crop plants, specifically the long-lived grape vines. He argues as have others that agriculture opens up important new avenues for research in human-plant geographies, offering particular insights into social life's reliance on plants. Through ethnographic fieldwork in an intensive and heavily mechanised form of viticulture, Brice contests any romanticised distinction between planty and modern human temporalities. Rather he shows how the vines become active participants in the patterning of social time, arguing that modern human sociality and culture 'do not originate from an intersubjectivity transacted among people alone' (p. 2). Intense labour is needed to coordinate the labour patterns of workers with the subtle material changes in the grapes as they ripen. Brice also shows how scientific sensory practices are part of the means by which we can become more attuned to plants, together with embodied engagements with soil, vines and grapes.

Each of the authors has identified important political dimensions of human-plant relations, showing how biopolitics is 'a deeply empirical affair' (Hinchliffe and Bingham 2008, 1541), emergent from contingent relations. Various scales of governance are recognised in the papers: urban, national, international markets, intimate acts and militaristic metaphors such as invasion. Both collaborative and conflictual practices between humans and plants are documented here, showing how 'a politics of conviviality' (Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006) often coexists with practices of killing. Some of the papers aim to open up new spaces of political actions. For example Poe et al's relational political ecology and multispecies assemblages assert different rights to belong in the city. Patrick's queer ecology aims to explore 'the ground on which political consideration of human-plant relationality might begin to challenge dominant modes of urban development' (p. 17). If plants are understood as

agents and subjects, we need to ask how policies and governance would and should look different.

The papers in this issue draw on a variety of methods, all of them in the ethnographic tradition so important in cultural geography. The authors recognise the political questions inherent in any epistemology. As Poe et al. argue, ‘we recognize that having placed ourselves in the ‘thick of things’... we are both constituted by, and active agents in, the constitution of assemblages we describe here as ‘urban foraging’ (p. 3). None of these are explicitly methodological papers, and one task that is important over the coming years is to grapple more systematically with the question of how we do ethnobotany, or cultural geography attuned to human-plant encounters, in more relational ways (Hitchings and Jones 2004), as others have pondered for animals (Buller 2014, Hodgetts and Lorimer 2014). What are the power relations involved in doing our own research? What would it mean to do research on as well as with plants; not only what kinds of methods would work well, but what kinds of dispositions would be required of researchers? What demands does this kind of approach make of geography and geographers?

Jasanoff (2004a) has used the idiom of coproduction as one kind of disposition, or orientation to openness. Coproduction offers new ways of thinking about power by highlighting the invisible ‘knowledges, technical practise and material objects shaping, sustaining, subverting or transforming relations of authority’ (Jasanoff 2004a: 4). Coproduction also insists that ‘power is constituted as much as through the elision of marginalised alternatives as through the positive adoption of dominant view points’ (Jasanoff 2004b: 280). Attending to plant difference as well as attuning to their ‘absence’ thus has the potential to be practically useful - illuminating our interconnectivity as well as our interdependence. Archaeobotanists in particular have made important contributions to thinking about plant absence in the context of relatively poor material preservation of plant remains. How might such insights into absence - shadows, traces or windows - offer us new openings into the world of human-plant relations? What might be revealed in otherwise mundane or invisible spaces and places, or what might be reconfigured in the context of urgent change?

Further, since questions of methodology are ontological as well as epistemological, attending to the more-than-human in this way is an inherently political and ethical act - both for the knowledges produced as well as for the process of research itself (Bawaka Country et al. 2014). Attending and attuning to the radical difference of plants will not only reveal our

interconnectivity – it will necessarily challenge us, requiring us to ask which categories are useful and which need rethinking. It may also decentre our very human sense of authority (Bawaka et al. 2014). In order to step aside from the risks of ventriloquism (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) – of speaking *for* or even *with* plants, we may instead need to ask what we have been permitted to hear and what we have been permitted to share. One methodological challenge posed by Jones et al. (2014) is how we might consider more-than-human participation within the research process itself. Bastian (2014) suggests that while methodologies of working with human participants have required researchers to develop systems of consent, thinking about how research might be coproduced with more-than-human participants is a much more difficult prospect.

The discussions in this special issue challenge what Hecht et al. (2014 p. 6) call ‘ecological blindness’, and address the need for new kinds of thinking about biodiversity conservation in the Anthropocene (Lorimer 2012). Plants, as both individuals and different kinds of collectives, play a key role in the emerging environmental political issues of the twenty-first century; biofuels, carbon economies, and food and livelihood dynamics. They continue to be fundamental to human survival in a host of ways. We hope this special issue helps open new conversations about these oldest of our human relationships.

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Figure 1. Signage in Forty Mile Scrub National Park, Queensland. Photo: Jenny Atchison

