

Book Review | Covert Plants: Vegetal consciousness and agency in an anthropocentric world

Edited by Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits

(Brainstorm Books, 2018)

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I need hardly say that I have no intention of reviewing all the proofs of intelligence which the plants give us. These proofs are innumerable and continual, especially among the flowers, in which the effort of vegetable life towards light and understanding is concentrated.

—Maurice Maeterlinck, *L'intelligence des Fleurs*

As detailed in the eponymous *Plant Theory* by Jeffrey Nealon, plant theory is neither the thinking *of* plants nor thought *about* plants by humans. Plant thinking is instead the experienced pattern of thought by no identity that emerges out of ecosystems engaged in photosynthesis and subject to natural and sexual selection now aware of itself. And plant theory is happening! This is good news for those who wish inquiry to transcend rather than stagnate into contemporary debates always, it would seem, recursively only about themselves. Plant perception, plant signaling and behavior, plant intelligence: all of these technoscientific facts *confound* us and ask us to ponder the delicious news that plants are anything but idle or indifferent! To respectfully remix Donna Haraway into the post-*Avatar* moment, from rapidly expanding cannabis culture to the plant savior Groot, plants themselves are now disturbingly sentient, while we ourselves seem frighteningly inert.

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But, yet more good news: *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World* offers a glorious sampler of strains and genres of plentiful plantitude, a seed mix of covert plant action tended and cultivated by Prudence Gibson and Baylee Bries. What an extraordinary brew is here concocted, a vegetalismo of academic reason, with song. There are poems that provide instant and incandescent context for the more scholarly inquiries into Kant and Goethe, as if each were written for each other, like plant symbionts, shamanic allies of force and light. As a result, the mixture makes the book an enlightening pleasure to read. Unlike many edited collections, where chapters can take on a frightening consistency as all concerned ensure that they agree with each other on their major premises, *Covert Plants* offers an admixture that keeps us stretching towards the light.

Luke Fisher's "Gardening/Grasshopper in a Field," for example, instructs us directly in the sort of immanent thinking necessary to the arrival of the plant as sentient evolutionary co-partner:

Who took the young thin stems
And bent them to be your legs,
Folded leaves like origami
To make a pair of wings? (p. 60)

Fisher here guides would be phytonauts—explorers, yes, of the plant realm—in the forms of attention that enable plant thinking and perception: watch as patterns unfurl across phyla, plant insect insect plant, all the while retaining the singularity of some plant aspect or consistency that persists. There is a good variation in the mix, with sections ranging over everything from neuroscientific metaphor—a particularly luminous essay by Baylee Brits—and an icaro, a chanting by Tamryn Bennett in homage to the songs of the Upper Amazon:

Caapi,cipó
yagé, yajé
natem, Shorit
aya spirit vine (p. 122)

Some academic writing on plants is excited but guarded about the real stakes, rarely turning towards the introspective. But there is nothing covert about the courage, persistence, and quality of the diverse treatments of phytopsyche to be found in this volume. Plants are not a theme that repeats across this book but an awareness that occurs and transforms as each chapter tunes our attention

towards some aspect of plant being.

And persist it does, as artists such as Natalie Jeremijenko sprout into dialogue with Susie Pratt, giving crucial context to the ways artists were *always already*, as we used to say before plant theory, tapping into the utopian flavor to be found in dialogue with plants. Jeremijenko maps out a mutualist encounter with plants—as in her project TREExOFFICE, a “co-working space in a tree and owned by a tree” (p. 214)—that literally entangles ownership frameworks, the roots of a tree, and the labor that would emerge out of it. If we compare TREExOFFICE with its synergetic forebears, the tensegrity domes of Buckminster Fuller, we see that utopias can still sprout in the oddest places, less “before the law” than beyond it, linking TREExOFFICE to those courageous tree sitters such as Julia Butterfly Hill who have taught us all the dharma of the trees.

Lest you find yourself allergic to the utopian puffery above (the reviewer’s, not the collection), fear not, for there are works of extraordinary scholarship that are as fiercely careful in their commitment to the attentive exegesis of philosophical texts as they are radically open to the implications of their insights. *Covert Plants* ups the ante on the next wave of thinking, creating, and feeling our way through the unmistakable fact that plants are our symbiotic partners as we hurtle through space. Brainstorm Books is to be commended for the volume, a fresh harvest of the finest strains.

Author Bio

Richard Doyle (aka Mobius) is the author of scores of scholarly articles and seven books. He has been awarded grants from the National Science Foundation and the Mellon Foundation while winning acclaim and accolades as a classroom teacher in the US, the UK, Germany, and China. In 2002, Doyle was healed of life long severe asthma in an ayahuasca ceremony, and he has since devoted his life to synthesizing the world’s spiritual practices into a practical, open source and empirically verifiable pathway available to all. Edwin Erle Sparks Professor at Penn State, Doyle’s recent books include, *The Genesis of Now*, *Darwin’s Pharmacy*, and *Looking Upside Down at Nothing*.