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Giovanni Aloï, ed.

ESTADO VEGETAL:  
PERFORMANCE AND  
PLANT-THINKING

University of Minnesota Press, 2023.

I will admit that, when I first proposed to review this edited volume, I was only attracted to the subtitle: *Performance and Plant-Thinking*. I had not yet seen the work at the crux of the volume, Manuela Infante’s play *Estado Vegetal*. Shortly into the “Introduction” by Aloï I was hooked. This is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the volume in question: as a truly interdisciplinary volume, with a somewhat unconventional structure, it has the ability to engage with, intrigue and challenge readers from a broad spectrum of vegetable curiosities. Aloï warns in his “Introduction” that the book is a continuation of thinking *with* plants rather than thinking *about* plants. As such, there are contributions of experimental poetry and fiction and an interview, as well as the more traditional scholarly chapters. The play in question appears at the back of the book, highlighting the fact that the many theories and thought experiments of the previous pages are not only applicable to the one performance. Rather, the performance provokes vegetal questions which could have answers in surprising places.

The contributors to the volume include Michael Marder (“The Right of the Other: Interpretation in Four Acts”), Maaïke Bleeker (“Thinking in the World: *Estado Vegetal* as Thought-Apparatus”), Lucy Cotter (“Theatre and Thinking, Art as

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Nonknowledge”), Giovanni Aloï (“Introduction” and “Vegetal Mythologies: Potted Plants and Storymaking”), Dawn Sanders (“Attending to ‘Plantness’ in *Estado Vegetal*”), Catriona Sandilands and Prudence Gibson (“‘I Can’t Move’: Plants and the Politics of Mobility”), Sibila Sotomayor Van Rysseghem (“Feminist Structures: Polyphonic Networks”), and Mandy-Suzanne Wong (“After *Estado Vegetal*”). An English translation of *Estado Vegetal* and a conversation between Aloï and Manuela Infante are included. Major themes of the play, including mobility, unknowability of the Other, radical alterity of distributed consciousness, polyvocality and gender, are examined by Marder, Aloï, Sandilands and Gibson, and Sotomayor Van Rysseghem. Dramaturgical form, theory and the immersive experience created by *Estado Vegetal*’s unique *mis-en-scène* (a sparse set with few props, mostly emphasizing the role of the potted plants) are explored by Bleeker, Cotter and Sanders. Sanders’ contribution proposes novel ways to incorporate this embodied, vegetal experience into a scientific pedagogical piece that reads nicely in conversation with Bleeker’s discussion of the different thinking of theatre and Cotter’s excellent exploration of form and the theatre as alternative sources of experimentation. Sotomayor Van Rysseghem quite literally ‘talks back’ to theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Vir Cano and Laura Fernández Cordero, Deleuze and Guattari, Donna Haraway and Gayatri Spivak, in a creative, poetic piece that appears in English translation as well as its original Spanish version. A short story by Wong gives extended voices to two of the most enigmatic characters of the play, outlining the personification of the tree and the arborealation of Maria Soledad. The final contribution is a conversation between Aloï and Infante which sheds light on the process of the play’s creation, and Infante’s philosophical inspirations and future projects.

Certain theorists loom large—nearly every contribution cites Michael Marder (not entirely surprising considering not only his prominence in the field but also the fact that Infante herself credits his books *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*,<sup>2</sup> *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*<sup>3</sup> and *Grafts: Writings on Plants*<sup>4</sup> as inspiration for her play).<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are also well represented and Donna Haraway is mentioned several times. Somewhat surprisingly, in a book about a play where the intentions of a tree are called into question, the groundbreaking work of Suzanne Simard<sup>6</sup> is referred to only once, by Sandilands and Gibson—but perhaps this is because, as noted above, the play (and the book) are less about what exactly plants are thinking, and more about what being a plant *might* be

<sup>2</sup> Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Marder, *Grafts: Writing on Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Manuela Infante and Giovanni Aloï, “In Conversation,” in *Estado Vegetal: Performance and Plant-Thinking*, ed. Giovanni Aloï (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (New York: Penguin, 2021).

like and how plants *might* be thinking. Speculative possibilities propagate throughout the pages. The structure of the book also seems appropriately modeled on the concept of thinking alongside plants, as opposed to thinking about them. Each contribution could easily stand on its own but is all the richer for being entangled into conversation with its counterparts. Refuting a traditional academic structure of starting at the beginning (the play) and building upwards in sedimentary layers of exposition, this volume instead branches off from form to pedagogy, from personal musings to political poetry. If I had one criticism it would only be a request for more. Of course, each edited volume is susceptible to the common criticism of “but why not this?”—and we are all aware that such volumes can only include so much and are inevitably subject to the whimsy of contributors’ interests. All the same, I would have enjoyed a piece that explored in more depth the non-heteronormative future and how entwining mothering with the vegetal questions a silently pervasive assumption that human sexuality is by design heterosexual and aimed at reproduction. Throughout the play, the characters take on caring roles for each other and their community (Eva for her neighborhood, Joselino for Nora, Nora for her plants) while often emphasizing that they are not related to each other—as Eva emphatically remarks more than once, “No! I’m a neighbor, I don’t have children.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the traditional human lines of heredity are cut short: the Mother is left with a vegetable of a son who, by his own admission, “is only the memory of a seed.”<sup>8</sup> The queerness of plants, the queer distribution of their caring systems and their queer futures is the only omission I find in the present volume. □

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<sup>7</sup> Infante, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Infante, 153.