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8-1-2023

## **The Stories Plants Tell: An Introduction to Vegetal Narrative Cultures**

Frederike Middelhoff  
*Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany*

Arnika Peselmann  
*Julius-Maximilians University Würzburg, Germany*

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### **Recommended Citation**

Middelhoff, Frederike and Peselmann, Arnika (2023) "The Stories Plants Tell: An Introduction to Vegetal Narrative Cultures," *Narrative Culture*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/narrative/vol10/iss2/2>

# The Stories Plants Tell

## An Introduction to Vegetal Narrative Cultures

From the onset of cultural history, plants have played a significant role as subjects in and characters of human storytelling in both oral and written traditions, and they continue to be involved in narrative practices worldwide. Their relevance in stories about metamorphoses, for instance, which explore ideas about the various forms of life, co-existence and survival, is a trans-cultural phenomenon: the ancient Greek nymph Daphne, who is transformed into a laurel tree in Ovid, is a well-known example in Western cultures; less so is the Burmese story of Prajapati, god of all creation, turning into a mango tree, or the tale of Chonganda, the creator of the first plant in the central African tradition of the Kuba people. Plants feature prominently in folklore, legends, and fairy tales where they not only drive the plot of the story or convey “hidden” messages—e.g., apples turning into a poisonous weapon (*Snow White*) or a signifier of love (*The White Snake*)<sup>1</sup>—but also mediate social beliefs, cultural practices, and agricultural knowledge. Various Native American legends, like *The Coming of Corn*, emphasize the existential connection between humans and plants and pass on important cultivation techniques; beans, corn, and squash (*The Three Sisters*) tell a powerful story of companionship, advocating a sustainable agricultural model which

counters Western monocropping techniques. Plants take part in stories about community building (e.g., the Russian story about an old man who needs the physical and moral support of his family, friends, and allies including, in some versions, animal allies—to extract a *penka*, a “gigantic turnip,” from the ground) but also in the violent (hi)stories of colonial settlement. A well-known example of the latter is that of the frontiersman “Johnny Appleseed,” based on the historical figure of the English settler John Chapman, who planted apple seeds of the non-endemic *malus domestica* along and beyond the North American frontier (Pollan). Many plant species are crucial for stories about somatic and psychological healing (in phytomedicine, herbal therapy, homeopathy, etc.); about religious convictions, morality, virtue, and sin;<sup>2</sup> about the development of the biosphere and evolutionary theory; and, indeed, about what constitutes “civilization” and “culture” (from the Latin *colere* for “cultivating,” “growing,” and “tending”).

In Western societies and sciences especially, the qualities and modes of vegetal being have been frequently storied as the absolute other of “human nature,” in an effort to map out anthropological differences, generate notions of “the human,” and define (not only metaphorically) who “vegetates,” who “thrives” and “flourishes,” and indeed who is “who”—a “person,” in contrast to an (allegedly) unconscious, insentient, immobile nonhuman vegetal “what.”<sup>3</sup> Western imaginaries have built upon and continue to promote the idea that plant natures can be characterized by complacency and peacefulness, implying a lack of self-determination and agency. Accordingly, aggressive and even eroticized depictions of vegetal beings might cause strong irritation—as not only Carl Linnaeus’s refusal to admit the existence of carnivorous plants exemplifies (Weiss, “Pflanzenhorror”)—and have even established a subgenre within horror stories (Karafyllis). Simply put, many stories told about plants are more revealing about the people telling them, the cultural contexts, and prevailing ontologies in which these plant stories are embedded, than about the actual qualities and potentials of vegetal worlds. But plant lives are quite literally and materially constitutive for the stories humans conceive, be they composed in the mode of the spoken word or in visual expressions: vegetal beings have enabled papyrus and paper production, the making of ink, pencils, crayons, painting colors, and canvases; and they have been fueling, nourishing, and clothing the people who in turn enfold them into narratives and storylines. Narrative cultures are thus inextricably connected, and materially-semiotically indebted to plants, prompting the more-than-metaphorical subtitle of this article: “Vegetal Narrative Cultures.”

The intricate links between storytelling practices and vegetal worlds have only recently become part of Western scholarship's concern. The emerging fields of human-plant studies and cultural plant studies have brought attention to "biases against plants" in Western cultures and societies, a bias that has contributed to ways of overlooking vegetal worlds despite their omnipresence and existential relevance for human and other-than-human lives (Montgomery 4). This "*plant blindness*" also pertains to questions about the significance of plants for storytelling practices and the intricate relationships between plants and narratives more generally (Wandersee and Schussler 82). Although the environmental humanities, animal studies, and multispecies ethnography in particular have started to investigate "human narratives about their experiences with other-than-humans" (Fenske and Norkunas 106), plants often tend to become marginalized and are seldom the center of scholarly attention in either anthropology or narratology.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to promote "plant awareness" (Montgomery 4), both the "narrative turn" (cf. Goodson and Gill) and the "nonhuman turn" (cf. Grusin) still need to be critically explored regarding plant theory in general, and the vegetal dimensions of storytelling in particular. Part of the academic "plant bias" is the fact that vegetal lives have conventionally been (mis-)interpreted as background material for, or symbolic figurations in, *human* narratives, i.e., the stories *humans* tell about human worlds (Montgomery 154). Be it in the code of a "language of flowers" used to speak about the (morally) unspeakable (cf. Kranz et al.), in collected volumes of sophisticated text selections, i.e., *belles lettres* ("florilegia"), or in narratives about the emergence and functions of national emblems (a classic is the "German" oak or the "German" forest, cf. Lehmann), plants in these texts and contexts have traditionally been regarded as metaphorical means to anthropocentric ends: to tell human, perhaps all-too-human, (hi)stories.

By contrast, the interdisciplinary field of ethnobotany has been aiming to investigate plants beyond their symbolic meaning since the inception of the discipline. Ethnobotanists study "the interaction of plants and people, including the influence of plants on human culture" (Balick and Cox vii). Mainly working with or being part of Indigenous communities themselves, ethnobotanists ask how plants are part and parcel of human societies—as remedy, food, textile, or trade commodity—but they also investigate taxonomic classifications of plants and narratives of vegetal beings in myths and legends.<sup>5</sup> Non-Western storytelling in particular has shown very different understandings of plants: as kin (e.g., Miller), they are acknowledged as a form of life on earth preceding human existence; this

priority distinguishes them as more-than-human teachers of the people willing to listen, learn about, and (re-)tell stories of the vegetal (Kimmerer 346–347). As a result, plants and people can become allies in ways that resemble what Natasha Myers has proposed as the counter-narrative to and an alternative perspective for the “Anthropocene”: the “Planthropocene” (“How to Grow”).<sup>6</sup> Attuning our sensorium to plant being, drawing on Indigenous plant ontologies and more-than-human epistemes that transcend anthropocentrism and colonial approaches to dealing with vegetal worlds provides powerful but also challenging avenues for questioning what constitutes and what is knowledgeable about plant life and vegetal narrative cultures but also, more specifically, about vegetal forms of communication and interaction.

Critical plant studies (Laist), cultural botany (Ryan, “Passive Flora”), and literary and cultural plants studies (Middelhoff; Jacobs and Kranz; Stobbe, “Plant Studies”) have begun to follow similar directions by re-visiting and re-configuring the parameters of how storied plants,<sup>7</sup> and plants *in* stories, might be re-read as subjects in their own right; how plant agency and plant language might be conceptualized; and how methodologies drawn from posthuman, poststructuralist, neo-materialist, ecocritical, and multispecies theories, from plant philosophy and (critical) phytology can help revise a default understanding of plants as inert, mute matter and instead argue for vegetal creativity, intervention, expressiveness, and co-authorship (cf. Stobbe et al.). Such critical approaches underpin the contributions to this issue, as they inquire into the means of how stories *about* plants might better be conceived as stories *with* plants. Vegetal lives have inscribed themselves in and contributed to narratives in various ways (Vieira; Nitzke; Ryan, “Writing the Lives of Plants”; Nitzke and Braunbeck). Photosynthetically, they bring forth the basic material needed for humans to speak out and write down: oxygen/air. Plant studies suggest that vegetal beings can thus be acknowledged as conspirators of breaths and stories that emerge as genuine more-than-human narratives (Myers, “How to Grow” 56).

Vegetal agency becomes particularly visible in the material and narrative constitution of landscapes, the cultivation and plantation of fruit trees being only one of many examples (Peselmann 62). Yet plants are not only involved in the making of spatial structures but also in subverting and dismantling them when they transgress national borders and/or ecological systems and become discursively problematized as “invasive species” (Starfinger; Stobbe, “Einheimische Exoten”). In colonial and capitalist plantation projects, vegetal growth has been the subject of,

and subjected to, manifold ways of storytelling. To pay particular attention to the impact of capitalist modes of production on the well-being of human and more-than-human lives, Anna Tsing calls for “stories of commodities under production” (Tsing, “Blasted Landscapes” 106). These stories demonstrate not only the destructive effects the process of commodification has on living beings but also show modes of resistance—such as that of the matsutake mushroom, which opposes any attempt of domestication (cf. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*). Similarly, Donna Haraway, among those who coined the term “Plantationocene” (100 et passim) to critically reflect the colonial legacies and persisting socio-ecological impacts of mono-crop expansion, emphasizes the need to tell “response-able” stories that reckon with and render visible “abundant histories of conquest, resistance, recuperation, and resurgence,” and that imagine both challenges and hopes of hospitable companion species societies and multispecies, messmate futures: “Telling stories together with historically situated critters is fraught with the risks and joys of composing a more livable cosmopolitics” (14, 15). The introduction of palm oil trees to Southeast Asia or soybeans to South America, for example, has evoked “extinction stories” such as those about the sago palm told by the Indigenous Marind people of West Papua: a tree endangered by spreading palm oil plantations (Chao), but we also see stories of anti-capitalist resistance, starring the amaranth plant as the invincible weed and antagonist to soy monocultures (Langthaler 43). Rejecting the idea of narratives as an “anthropocentric ‘proper’”, Thom van Dooren and the late Deborah Bird Rose go even further and suggest a “nonhuman storying of places” (4, 1). Applying a broad understanding of a story that “emerges out of an ability to engage with happenings in the world as sequential and meaningful events”, they investigate the particular place-making strategies of different animals in Sydney, Australia—in van Dooren and Rose’s case study, penguins and flying foxes—as “minimal storying” (3, 4). Sydney’s animals, therefore, contribute to the formation of a multispecies city and its storied places.

As these examples show, academic interest in the modes of storytelling with and about more-than-human lives has largely focused on animals (cf. also Heyer); plants, by contrast, play a much less prominent role in these approaches to narrative cultures “beyond the human.” Similarly, open questions remain concerning the relationship between plants and storytelling in different medial contexts. While vegetal lives have been discussed as both effecting and affecting media on the one hand (Myers and Hustak), as integral partakers in the history of media and art (see, e.g., Weiss; Rieger), it still needs to be clarified how plants—dependent

on varying historical and cultural contexts—might be said to shape the scripts, settings, and storylines of literary texts and the visual and digital arts (beyond the trope/myth of the Wood Wide Web), as well as the narratives and modes of representation in the various disciplines concerned with plant lives, from plant biology and phytoneurobiology to pharmacology and agrarian sciences.

The contributors of this special issue work in the field of cultural and social anthropology, philosophy as well as literary and cultural studies. In their articles, they probe the threefold spectrum of what we propose might account for the stories plants tell: the ways in which plants co-author and shape narration; the ways in which stories about plants are telling of and fundamental for the construction and development of more-than-human societies; and the ways in which plant articulations are narrated and translated in multispecies contexts. Based on broad concepts of narration and text, narrative ecologies and representation (including literary works, nonfiction, everyday life stories, patent scripts, and artistic practices creating and combining stories), the contributions to this issue explore the role of plants in narrative cultures, creative practices, metaphysics, and *logos*, and account for both multispecies perspectives as well as situated knowledge related to different historical periods. The articles offer fresh perspectives for planthroposcenic futures but do not suggest final answers or final conclusions for thinking with, or speculating about, vegetal narrative cultures.

Michael Marder's article, "A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell" opens this issue with a philosophical inquiry into three conceptions of what he outlines as vegetal storytelling. Via a re-reading of ancient Greek sources as well as a critical engagement with poststructuralist theory and Indian philosophy, Marder invites his readers to consider the (1) story of plant life, (2) stories of plant communities, and (3) stories of a plant. After elucidating the chiasmic structure of animal *logos* and vegetal *muthos*, which highlights the vegetality of storytelling per se, Marder investigates the narrative modes of plant life in its centrality, cyclicity, inclusivity, and interactivity. He traces the entangled stories of plant communities via the example of storied forests and hylomorphic self-signification and teases out how plants narrate their milieu in the phytobiographical form.

Although Solvejg Nitzke also reserves a special focus on arboreal poetics, it is not the forest that serves as an exemplary narrative site in her article, "Narrative Trees. Arboreal Storytelling and What It Means for Reading." Instead, she offers a critical perspective on how contemporary dendrology and cultural anthropology try to promote the idea of trees as storytellers, but ultimately fail to concede to

both the human role in this storytelling practice as well as to the need to define their meaning of “story.” Analyzing biases and pitfalls of “tree narratives”—a wooden history (Trouet) and a sylvan thinking (Kohn)—Nitzke draws on bio-semiotics and material ecocritical theory to develop a cultural poetics of storytelling trees that acknowledges trees as a powerful medium prompting humans to tell their stories. As narrators of trees, Nitzke asserts, both artists and scientists need to become careful, critical readers of trees, equipping themselves with the necessary narratological tools and methods of interpreting arboreal poetics and articulating trees’ stories.

From an (eco-)feminist, posthuman, and postcolonial perspective, vegetal stories can also be understood as counter-narratives offering alternative ways of reading hegemonic stories about human ingenuity and mastery for their potential to reveal plant creativity: with reference to *Hoodia gordonii*, a South African plant known by the Indigenous San people as *!Khoba*, whose appetite suppressant compounds were patented by Western scientists, Laura Foster, in her contribution, “Plants as Inventors: Interrogating Human Exceptionalism within Narratives of Law and Vegetal Life,” pays critical attention to Western patent law. Using the lens of “vegetal feminism,” Foster asks what could be learned if plants were not seen as raw materials, but as inventors and creators of knowledge, with the production of certain substances as one possible outcome of vegetal agency. Foster underlines the necessity of paying attention to plants’ heritage and the historicity of multispecies entanglements in vegetal storytelling to make visible the effects of colonialism on human-plant relations to the present day.

The final section of this issue explores alternative modes of writing about, and methods for, thinking with plants in and beyond academic contexts. It addresses issues related to the question of how postcolonial perspectives and Indigenous knowledge might inform new ways of dealing with both colonial legacies as well as current crises affecting people and plants alike. Darya Tsybalyuk’s essay, “I Dream to See the Steppe Again” explores what kinds of stories can be told about the escalated war in Ukraine when foregrounding plant lives. Taking into account Kreidova flora (chalk flora), a part of the Ukrainian Steppe Nature Reserve heavily affected by military conflict as well as experiences of storytelling and drawing events with Ukrainian refugees in the UK, she asserts that stories about war and displacement need to include multispecies perspectives, as not only human and animal lives, but also plant lives, become devastated and displaced as the result of Russian warfare. Condemning the ongoing homicide as much as the ecocide in/



on Ukrainian land caused by Russia's invasion, Tsymbalyuk calls for a decolonizing of Ukraine and its vegetal ecologies in order to disentangle both the land and the plants from being rendered as victims of Russian aggression and objects of Western scientific discourses.

Finally, Natasha Myers discusses her work on and in Toronto's black oak savannah, her engagement with black oak lives and legacies, and her learning from Indigenous elders in an interview with the editors of this issue. In her critique of Western ecological restoration as practices of pre-figuring plants as discrete objects and mere resources, she advocates detuning "a settler common sense" about the living world. Myer argues that listening and responding to the stories plants tell requires new forms of reading, knowing, and thinking about plants with approaches speaking to human senses on different corporeal and affective levels as she follows and further develops these concepts as part of her own artistic research. Focusing on these different forms of how plants matter and make meaning, "The Stories Plants Tell" aims to highlight the crucial participation of plants in multispecies entanglements of narration and imagination, knowledge and affect.

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**Frederike Middelhoff** is Assistant Professor of German Literature with a focus on Romanticism Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany). Her research and teaching centers on the relationship between literature and knowledge around 1800 and is connected to the field of animal studies, plant studies, ecocriticism, and mobility studies.

**Arnika Peselmann** is a Scientific Associate in the department of European Ethnology at Julius-Maximilians University Würzburg (Germany). Her research focus lies in the field of critical heritage studies, borderland studies, and multispecies studies. Her current research project investigates plant-human relationships in apple breeding and growing in Northern Germany.

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## ■ NOTES

1. Cf. the manifold meanings of "magic" apples that have been collected by Eckhart Spengler in his entry in the *Encyclopedia of the Fairy Tale*.
2. The issue "Plantes et tradition orale," edited by Micheline Lebarbier and Ioana Andreesco in *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* (No. 53–54, 2004), addresses a broad

- range of storied plants and their meanings for religious practices, health issues or identity politics, as told in Brazil, Romania, and the United States.
3. Cf., among others, in this respect, Ingensiep; Hall; Marder; Keetley and Tanga; Coccia.
  4. Issues of marginalization in narratology, for that matter, arise from the very basis of their (implicit) anthropocentrism, cf. one of the definitions of “narrative” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*: “Narrative is about human experience” (Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative” 24). By contrast, see recent contributions to an ecologically-minded, more-than-human narratology (e.g., Weik von Mossner; Herman; Alber).
  5. Scholars in the field of ethnobotany have started to critically reflect on the discipline’s connections to Western colonialism including the exploitation of indigenous plant knowledge for commercial purposes. Ruth Goldstein, for instance, proposes “ethnobotanies of refusal” to fight biopiracy with reciprocal citation practices and by concentrating on plant ontologies instead of extracting economically usable plant knowledge (cf. Goldstein).
  6. Myers (“*How to Grow*”) has developed a playful but urgent ten-step guide to transform anthropocentric thinking into planthropocentric vistas: “The Planthropocene names an aspirational episteme, not a timebound era, one that invites us to stage new *scenes* and new ways to see and seed plant/people relations in the here and now, not some distant future. And it is grounded in the wisdom of the ancient and ongoing radical solidarity projects that plants have already cultivated with their many people” (55). See also the interview with Myers in this issue.
  7. “Storied plants” rephrases and builds upon the concept of “storied matter,” as introduced to the theory of material ecocriticism and posthuman thinking by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Iovino and Oppermann take seriously both the expressiveness of matter in networks of distributed agency as well as the diverse forms of articulation: storied matter “represents a new ecology of understanding the ultimate ontology of a meaningfully articulate planet. . . . Tree rings yield stories of long years of droughts and rains, while retreating glaciers transmit stories of changing ecosystems and climate, blending global warming with political anxieties and social changes.” In this vein, “storied plants” acknowledges “the narrative agencies” of plants “as active co-authors that shape this world and co-determine our existence” (Iovino and Oppermann; Oppermann 213). For an arboreal perspective on storied plants see Solvejg Nitzke’s contribution in this issue.

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