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## Book Review

Ryan, J.C., Gagliano, M., & Vieira, P. (Eds.). (2021). **The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence**. Synergetic Press.

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*“Plants do not write stories; plants create their own stories simply in the process of living.*

*Humans write stories about their relationships with plants,*

*and they are reflections of their interactions with them.”*

*David McKenna*

Dennis McKenna distilled the essence of “The Mind of Plants” with the quote in the foreword. This book is a collection of 40 essays and narratives, 14 poems and illustrations on human-plant entanglements worldwide. Each author has selected a focal plant to explore the idea of “the mind of the plant.” The title refers to two ideas and questions simultaneously. The first is regarding the intelligence of plants. In indigenous knowledge and other discourses, plants possess intelligence. Scientific research has been providing evidence for vegetal intelligence, like proof for plant signaling and behavior, indicating that plants can learn from prior experiences. They can sense, locate, identify, capture, and are masters in information processing and decision making. Intelligence can also refer to connectivity and harnessing it. The power of connectivity can be equated with Robin Wall Kimmerer’s quote from her essay on the white pine:

*“an individual is not smart [...] but merely lucky to be part of a system that has intelligence.*

*Be humble about this. The real intelligence isn’t the property of an individual;*

*the real intelligence is the property of the universe itself.” Seneca scholar John Mohawk*

The second thought behind the title and book is how people mind, not mind, or unmind plants. In the aegis of multiple crises, minding plants might be the key to create hopeful futures. This anthology does not answer the two questions in the title as there is no easy answer. The editors have clarified that this is not a scientific book, but a homage to the encounters of human authors with their plant allies, companions, and even teacher-tricksters. It is a book that defends ecological thinking and rejects human exceptionalism and the mechanistic worldviews that emerged in western culture since the 17th century. Unsurprisingly, romantic thinker Goethe is mentioned in a couple of contributions. This

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“convocation of plants, people and places” does not contain build-ups or bigger story arcs, as in monographs; that would diminish the effect that the editors desire to create, namely making people plant-minded by embracing chaos instead of linear processes, collaborating instead of creating.

I recommend reading this book leaf by leaf with enough time for composting. I felt something build in my mind with each essay and poem I read. To borrow the words of Luis Edoardo Luna, who described his experiences with Ayahuasca, I felt often at “brink of a discovery”, but I never discovered the ultimate answer on the questions about un/minding plants and the un/mindness of plants. Reading the book is like alchemy; it is perhaps more about working with the questions and elements rather than striking gold at the end. As mentioned in the book launch, the contributions should rather be seen as a menu of guidelines of experiences and experiments in interacting with a plant. Various authors like Craig Holdrege, in his contribution about the bloodroot, write about a plant-like way of communicating, working, sharing and being to illustrate how they do not think about the plants, but think with them. The book calls for experience and experiments to discover the clues to unravel mysteries or “the context of discovery” in the scientific process, as Laura Ruggles mused about in her retellings on Cornish Mallow. Authors like Sarah Laborde, Guto Nóbrega and Janice Lee pinpointed how breathing (with plants) helped the interaction, while others went for the edibility approach (Attala 2017), like Matteo Politi on his contribution on Ushpawasha sanango and Iván Darío Vargas Roncancio on yoko. Some contributors like Jeremy Narby mentioned the situated ethics with working with a specific plant in a specific place; for example, working with cannabis can be illegal and/or can be frowned upon. In the same line of ethics, Iván Darío Vargas Roncancio calls for a “vegetal protocol” in his contribution on Yoko, which refers to “the local ways of dealing with the entangled political, legal and cosmological worlds.”

Some of the results of this co-creation is about making the invisible visible, and metamorphosis through, practice like poetry (Luke Fisher and chestnut) or biochrome where decay reveals the truth beneath (Renata Buziak and the linden).

The varied roles of plants as agents were also highlighted in this work. Plants can be a friend, ally, a teacher, but for example, Jeremy Narby in his narrative on working with cannabis, reminds the reader they can also be a trickster, or have dual roles: a potential cure or poison, as Prudence Gibson mentions in her retelling of her encounters with Hornwort. A certain humbleness towards the plant is required, an idea present in other works on vegetal intelligence (Irigaray and Maunder 2016). McKenna, in the foreword, reminds us that plant interaction is all chemistry. He explains the process of photosynthesis and that this makes plants much more brilliant chemistry masters than humans. Humans are some sort of parasites dependent on their chemical skills.

Another theme was plants as “agents of memory and emotion;” in the contributions on, for example, the common oak, linden tree, and the olive tree, the plant was channelling the contributor back to their childhood. Other contributors highlight how plants are part of cultural identity, through their gastro-political role (e.g., André G. Parise Gabriel R. A. de Toledo and bean, Patricia Gaglano and wheat). Through plants we can belong, because they connect us with the soil from which we hail (Esthela Calderón and corn).



Some noteworthy contributions are Damiano Benvegnù's story about the neo-fascist organisation planting trees on a mountain in Italy which lost trees in a wildfire resultant of a former fascist project. The neo-fascists did not understand that their efforts were meaningless. It illustrated what happens if you unmind plants and do not engage with them or their locations for a long time. Gagliano wrote about her dual relationship with wheat, explaining how it is a political plant and she was bound to it as by contract due to her background. She minds the plant, and explains through her research how it is highly addictive while iterating that it is not the choice of the plant, like in the case of tobacco, to be harmful and highly addictive. The toxic relationship might be the result of a loss of ceremony in her culture; it is ceremony that also ensures that we are not taken over by feral plants (Tsing et al. 2020). Other contributions were about the presencing ability of plants (e.g., Kristi-Onzik and the passion flower) and the timescale of plants and humans (e.g., Sarah Laborde and the apple tree). This collection of local histories of entanglements and encounters is a reminder about chronopolitics and how the capitalocentric politics of speed harm the ecologies. In the story of the suicide tree, Afshin Akhtar-Khavari recounts how love for offspring lead to deeds of self-sacrifice, propagating that nature can be about social life and organization. In his contribution on Xiang si (acacia) and the symbolical and the relational plant mind, Alex K: Gearin warns about the dangers of only looking at the symbolic of the psyche and human world and making plants mere echo chambers of ourselves. Sophie Chao's story about Sago-Marind people-palm oil consisted a narrative of how most Marind people viewed the palm oil as a villain; she recalled an old Marind woman who was curious and wanted to explore living with the troubles of palm oil, thus planting a seed for a hopeful future.

Moreover, attention should be given to the 54 illustrations of the plants by José María Pout Lezaun, who described his style during the October 2021 book launch as "weird tribal," because they lie between experimental and real. His illustrations are abstract, but due to the anatomical elements, still recognizable. He explained his choice of style: to ensure an intimate relation between reader and illustration too. In some illustrations, he even hid small patterns that are often a glimpse to the personal story of the contributor, like a moth in the illustration of the red oak.

Plants have informed how we understand ourselves. If we decenter our minds, we might understand who we are in this network of life, be aware of the interrelatedness to non-human beings and heal our alienation with the rest of nature. The editors did a marvelous job in finding these humans with their diverse approaches, experiences and experiments. They foregrounded palm, grass, cactus, burdock and liana in their introductions and illustrated how plants guided them and others in "life and research decisions." This book was a beautiful invitation to collaborate with (other) nature, and a lighthouse for creating hopeful futures.

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