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From the anthropocene to the planthroposcene: Designing gardens for plant/people involution

Natasha Myers

Debbora Battaglia's essay opens portals to entire worlds that turn around plants, sites in which people and their attendant techniques, technologies, and magic get caught in the spiralling whorl of plant beings and doings. Plants are, like their roots, entangling. Nourishing, aromatic, sensitive, and sentient, plants entice entire ecologies of other creatures to participate in their care and their propagation: they have the know-how to entrain others in service of their rhythms, their wiles, and desires (Hustak and Myers 2012). And, as it turns out, people might be the best equipped of all other creatures, to respond to their every whim.

As Battaglia's stories attest, these plant/people intimacies are often mediated – and even enhanced – through techniques and technologies: a simple pole supports a plant's tropic turn to the light; nutrient mists microns in diameter quench the thirst of the thinnest root hairs; select sources of light excite a plant's photosynthetic organs; a magical prism erected here, an incantation recited there. A well-tended garden, whether in a bucket or on board a space station, provides a stage for plants and people to perform their entangled powers.

Gardens are sites where it is possible to get a feel for the momentum that propels people to involve themselves with plants. Where evolution describes those longue durée events that find species diverging from one another, *involution* offers a way to story the ongoing, improvised, experimental encounters that take shape when beings as different as plants and people involve themselves in one another's lives (Hustak and Myers 2012). Involution describes a 'reciprocal capture' (Stengers 2010) that binds plants and people in projects of co-becoming. Turning tropically to one another, plants and people are both in-the-making in sites like gardens.

Gardens are for me poignant sites for anthropological inquiry into the various ways that *people stage relations with plants* – whether these relations are intimate, extractive, violent, or instrumentalizing. Battaglia's accounts of gardens – experimental, exhibitionist, capital-intensive, magical, ancient, modern, urban, and in orbit – can teach us important lessons about the ways that people are staging relations to plants today, in these uncertain times.

Garden design matters. Plants surely have such a firm hold on our lives (think food, fuel, fodder, fibres, pharmaceuticals, and more), that one could even say that 'we are only because they are' (Myers 2016). And yet, in the plant/people power nexus, humans remain the ones who draw up the designs: we have the buckets, bulldozers, concrete, glass, metal, fertilizers, pesticides, soil assays, scaffolding, harvesting techniques, hunger, and aesthetic desires. For me, the ethnographic question becomes: how do people choose to stage their relations with plants? We could even ask: What is a given garden

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designed for? And what interbeing relations does a garden propagate? Battaglia is right to insist that ethics in the gardens she documents are 'in suspension', and perhaps they should remain so: before we can ask questions about what is right, good, just, or proper for the plants or the people (and I would assert *we do not yet know what is proper to a plant* – plants might love the quenching rush of those aeroponic mists!), first we need to see what relations these gardens set in motion. And as Donna Haraway (1991) keeps reminding me, we must never forget to ask: 'for whom and at what cost'?

Where my own work examines the aesthetics and politics of garden enclosures and ecological restoration projects (Myers 2015a, in press a, in press b), Battaglia's itinerary through gardens aeroponic and otherwise draws attention to the scaffoldings and support systems that gardeners (including labourers, engineers, architects, and others) craft inside these enclosures. Garden infrastructures matter, and not only to the plants. They not only enforce biopolitical regimes that dictate who can and cannot live inside or outside the enclosure (think weeding, pesticides, etc.). Garden infrastructures also shape how plants and people get entrained to one another's lives. Consider the migrant labourer hanging from a 42-m mountain in the simulated Cloud Forest conservatory I document at Singapore's Gardens by the Bay (Myers 2015a). Or the sky rise infrastructures for urban aeroponic farming that Battaglia describes here. How do these garden infrastructures entrain both plant and human lives? What is it like to labour in these gardens? As a plant? As a gardener? What kinds of plant/people relations are in-the-making? These are some further questions to ask when we take as given that gardens are 'life support systems' for both their plants and their people. If gardens are also *worlding projects*, we can ask, not only what worlds are we cultivating in our gardens, but also, what worlds are our gardens designed to reproduce? Into which futures are we taking root?

Dismantling designs for the anthropocene

To follow through on these questions, I want to hold in suspension just one claim that Battaglia takes as 'given' in this paper, and add something to the series of claims she places 'under arrest'. Here I ask what if 'Marked expressions across sites of an anthropocenic consciousness of finitude' were not given for this analysis. What if this *anthropocenic consciousness* were itself placed under arrest and made strange? What difference would this make for an anthropological analysis of gardens and gardening?

Debates about where to place the golden spike for the onset of this new geological era wage on. And yet, whenever one chooses to mark the inception of the Anthropocene – whether one locates its origins at the invention of agriculture; the ravages of colonialism (Todd 2016); the industrial revolution and the vast expansion of plantation agriculture and forms of accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Tsing 2015); petrocapitalism's extractive 'exuberance' (e.g. Murphy 2016); or agriculture's chemical and industrial revolutions (Hetherington 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2015; Gordillo in press) – all have had devastating consequences for both plants and their people. Many criticisms have been waged against these periodizations and the name chosen to signify the cause and effects of the destruction. Much of that criticism has to do with naming 'Man' as singular agent. This move flattens differences and renders invisible other ways of doing life by lumping all humans together, as if all peoples everywhere share the same destructive tendencies (e.g. de la

Cadena 2015). This name also keeps intact Western assumptions that pit 'man against nature', perpetuating a fundamental split between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture. As geographer Eric Swyngedouw (2010) has shown, the Anthropocene has also become a post-political site for the cooptation of environmental action by a neoliberalism caught in the thrall of the carbon economy and the technological fix: 'we' got ourselves into this mess, and 'we' can get ourselves out of it through more of the same (geoengineering, sustainable infrastructures, responsible innovations, etc.). These technological fixes do nothing to challenge the very conditions that precipitate the ongoing destruction. In all cases, the Anthropocene's singular focus on human agency forgets both that *we are not one*, and that *we are not alone*.

If the Anthropocene has been thoroughly marked by the extractive logics of capitalism and the destructive power of colonialism, then perhaps it is in our best interests to get ourselves out from under its shadow. Perhaps one lesson we can learn is that it is time to stop *designing for the Anthropocene*; to stop locking ourselves into futures bound to these forces. What would Epcott's aeroponic gardens look like if they did not reproduce the same extractive, capitalist logics that are accelerating the very climate conditions that this form of 'responsible innovation' is supposed to mitigate? How might the zucchini experiments in space be staged if that project was not part of an exit strategy from a future earth that *will have been* scorched (on the future anterior, see Povinelli 2011). What if Singapore's Gardens by the Bay were not designed to profit from the very destruction of lands and bodies that its mausoleum-like 'Lost World' is meant to remember? Why should we cave to the allure of 'man's tragic detumescence' (Haraway and Kenney 2015), and let anthropocenic logics define how we have and will continue to cultivate futures with plants?

Here I would suggest that anthropologists find ways to make strange the inevitability of anthropocenic futures by doing just what Battaglia has done here: by foregrounding other ways that people cultivate relations with plants. I see the Trobriand Islander's urban gardeners among those many other 'anthropos-not-seen', which Marisol de la Cadena (2015) has so poignantly drawn attention to: those peoples and ways of doing life that have been violently written out of the past, present, and future. There are so many other ways to cultivate gardens and grow worlds, and so perhaps anthropologists could be on the lookout for 'marked expressions across sites' *that stage livable futures for both plants and people*. I read the Trobriand Islander's gardens, as well as many of the gardens cultivated by Indigenous peoples, subsistence farmers, urban gardens, artists, activists, and others (see Myers in press a) as evidence of the remarkable ways that people the world over are learning how to *conspire* with the plants (on conspiracy, see Choy 2016). I see these gardens as evidence of a range of radical solidarity projects that take as 'given' that *we are of the plants*; that our futures hinge on creating liveable futures with the plants.

What I want to see taking root in the ruins of Anthropocene thinking, is what I half cheekily and half seriously want to call the *Planthroposcene*. This is an aspirational episteme and way of doing life in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants. Crucially, the Planthroposcene does not name a time-bound era. Rather than signalling a temporal period after the fact, this formulation pivots around a generous reading of the suffix '-cene'. I hear '-cene' in multiple registers: both through Donna Haraway's (2015, 167) attention to the 'root meanings of –cene/kainos' which she interprets as

a 'temporality of the thick, fibrous, and lumpy 'now', which is ancient and not'; and in its homophonic vibrations with the terms 'seen', and 'scene' (de la Cadena 2015; Pandian 2015; Howe and Pandian 2016). I am particularly interested in the ways some garden designs have the potential to stage both new scenes of, and new ways to see (and even seed) plant/people involutions.

The Planthroposcene is a call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings. And so, what I would place 'under arrest' is any assumptions about *what is proper to a plant*, aeroponic or otherwise. Even as plant scientists reach into the vegetal sensorium for evidence of plant sentience, *we do not yet know what a plant wants or what a plant knows* (see Myers 2015b). And yet, we must find better ways to get to know plants intimately and on their terms, even if that demands extensive technological prostheses (see Myers in press b). And so we do need a *planthropology* to document the affective ecologies taking shape between plants and people, so we can learn to listen to their demands for unpaved land and, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2015) reminds us, for a time outside of the rhythms of capitalist extraction. We need to tap into their desire for forms of life that are not necessarily for us. To do this, we might want to find ways to *vegetalize* our all-too-human sensorium (Myers 2014), and learn how to involve ourselves with the plants. This might be one way to constitute a planet fit for what Anna Tsing (2015) might call 'collaborative survival'. If not, their undoing will truly be our undoing.

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