

Elizabeth Hope Chang. *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century.* Under the Sign of Nature Series. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. 240 pp. \$59.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-4247-6.

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Elizabeth Hope Chang's *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* examines the agency of plants in a wide range of British genre fiction from the 1850s to the 1920s. Transported around the world during these years, plant life was shaped by and also helped to shape the social, economic, and ecological transformations of empire. Chang exposes how genre fiction from these years uses plants, as imports and cultivars, to "explore questions of exoticism, foreignness, selfhood, and subjectivity" amid these global networks (p. 3). In so doing, such novels also offer conceptions of plant agency and consciousness that begin to redefine subjectivity beyond the limits of the human. *Novel Cultivations* will be of interest to many, from those working on non-human agency, world-ecology, and the crossovers between postcolonial and ecocritical theory, to those interested in the workings of the novel—and, indeed, the workings of plants—in the global nineteenth century.

Over five chapters, Chang leads her reader through a diverse range of detective, scientific romance, imperial gothic, and adventure fiction. Her wide array of "not entirely canonical literary examples" and resistance to strict periodization underpin the book's strength of argument (p. 17). Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

(1870), Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896), Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), Arthur Machen's *The Three Imposters* (1895), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and H. G. Wells's "The Door in the Wall" (1906) are just some of the texts to feature in chapter 2. These are contextualized by horticultural works, including John Loudon's *Suburban Horticulturalist* (1842), Thomas Fairchild's *The City Gardener* (1722), and Shirley Hibberd's *The Town Garden* (1859). With all five chapters including similar ranges of texts, each would benefit from subdivision into titled sections. Nevertheless, supported by a wealth of evidence, the book's chapters build on each other effectively, drawing out the developing associations of personal and horticultural cultivation while deftly showing the ways plants reconfigured existing conventions of culture and nature, domestic and foreign, subject and object, in the genre novel of the period.

The first chapter, "Detecting the Global Plant Specimen," introduces the global history of plant life in the nineteenth century and examines the place of these plants in the development of detective fiction. Chang's focus here is the narrative formulation of the clue—"a plot element demanding a newly pronounced attention to setting and the

broader environmental reference setting implies" (p. 34). When Ezra Jennings picks flowers from an English hedge that are familiar from the unnamed country of his birth, plants trace global networks integral to Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone's* (1868) narrative structure. Chang shows that Collins's novel and Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" (1893) thus develop the language of horticulture by figuring foreign cultivars as objects of narrative significance.

Chapter 2 examines plants within the urban gardens of imperial gothic novels. Where plants in detective fiction offer clues that look outward, supporting the "global acts of detection" needed to address domestic crime, plants turn gothic narratives inward, disrupting coherent senses of self and identity (p. 68). The glass Wardian case, introduced in the first chapter as the technology by which plant life was transported and cultivated around the world, also offered a way to grow exotic specimens amid urban pollution. Such glass-house technologies, Chang shows, "enable the sensory and epistemological production of the empire" in the industrial city (p. 55). Drawing on these associations, exotic plants in *Villette* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* parallel human and horticultural development, fragmenting Lucy Snowe and Dorian Gray as unified subjects. In so doing, these plants bring a suggestion of nonanthropomorphic agency to gothic narratives as part of the genre's wider challenge to normative conceptions of self and perception.

Chapter 3, "Strange Country Gardens," continues the work of chapter 2, illuminating the cultivated estate as a site that can fashion and disrupt individual, but also national, identity. Like the urban garden, the country garden of the period offers an artificial space. The estate garden is here "charged with the simultaneous expression of a historical English nativeness, demonstration of the geographical reach of empire, as well as ... manifestation of individual taste and aesthetic preference" (p. 86). Chang's reading of Frances Hodgson

Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) demonstrates how the novel's "anthrocentric acknowledgment" of plant consciousness highlights Mary's acculturation into the garden on her return from India, facilitating her assimilation into British life (p. 101). As an act of self-fashioning, Mary's cultivation of plant life simultaneously "reproduces heritage land claims," Chang argues, naturalizing exotic specimens in the English garden and thus hybridizing troubling conceptions of colonial and native Englishness (p. 119).

Chapter 4, "Acclimatization Abroad," turns from Britain to its colonies to focus on the agency of trees imported into the lands of settler and adventure fictions. Such narratives have traditionally been read as divergent, yet Chang links them by showing how arboreal management "anchors a narrative of wild adventure to its prospective future of planned cultivation" (p. 124). The introduction of eucalyptus trees in Rider Haggard's *Jess* (1908), for example, figures aesthetic, environmental, economic, and public health concerns as bound up with the cultivation of soils, plants, and settler identity. This close attention to the natural, cultivated, and economic histories of individual plant species is characteristic of Chang's careful scholarship.

The final chapter, "The Sentient Specimen Returns," also serves as a conclusion. Chang argues persuasively that texts like Algernon Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1907) explore emerging scientific ideas of plant consciousness put forward by, among others, Charles Darwin's son Francis. Blackwood's little-studied plant horror overtly questions "the anthropomorphic limits of the self" through the character of David Bittacy, who has returned with his wife to live in Hampshire after a career in the Indian Forest Service (p. 162). Narrative dissolution here parallels Bittacy's disappearance, and presumed assimilation, into an English wood, in an exploration of the limits of plant vitality.

Such readings raise the question of whether fictional investigations of plant consciousness offered narratives and metaphors of development that, in turn, shaped the science. This seems plausible in and through the work of polymaths, such as Grant Allen, whose writing Chang references throughout. That more is not done to trace the action of literary form in plant science is a possible criticism of *Novel Cultivations* but also a testament to the multiple routes the book offers for further investigation. Examining plants as horticultural specimens, Chang raises intriguing questions about the agency of plant life in the period's developing agricultural science; Haggard's writing on farming, discussed in chapter 4, suggests links between cultivation and character in more agricultural contexts. And the argument that plants and their nonanthropomorphic agencies were integral to nonrealist literature's efforts at "epistemological distinction from the deeply humanist project of realism" suggests that plant life might be read in realist narrative, too, as a related challenge to anthropocentrism (p. 101). Offering many such avenues for future scholarship, Chang's original readings of plant consciousness and agency in genre fiction make *Novel Cultivations* an important touchstone for work in the environmental humanities.

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