



**Lesley Wylie.** *The Poetics of Plants in Spanish American Literature*. Pitt Illuminations Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Illustrations. 232 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4625-0.

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Lesley Wylie's analytical project in *The Poetics of Plants in Spanish American Literature* is as ambitious as inspiring. Wylie examines the presence of plants in Spanish American literature from the late eighteenth century to the twenty-first century through "plant-centered readings" of various texts from a wide range of geographies, cultural traditions, and movements (p. 4). *The Poetics of Plants* can be positioned at the intersection of critical plant studies, Latin American ecocriticism, and posthuman approaches to literary studies.

Wylie is a leading scholar of literature and the environment in Latin America and currently an associate professor of Latin American studies at the University of Leicester. *The Poetics of Plants* follows the steps of her two previous books, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks: Rewriting the Tropics in the novela de la selva* (2009) and *Colombia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo* (2013). Wylie's preceding attention to literary productions from Colombia, Cuba, and Peru and her experience in literary geography are both felt throughout *The Poetics of Plants*, although the scope of this book is much broader than her previous ones.

As Wylie points out when situating her book in the introduction, *The Poetics of Plants* joins a dy-

namic and rapidly growing critical corpus that examines human-nonhuman relations in Spanish American literature, which includes such fundamental works as Jennifer French's *Nature, Neo-Colonialism and the Spanish American Regional Writers* (2005), Beatriz Rivera-Barnes and Jerry Hoeg's *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape* (2009), Laura Barbas-Rhoden's *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction* (2011), Gisela Heffes's *Políticas de la destrucción/Poéticas de la preservación* (2013), and William Flores's *Ecocrítica poscolonial y literatura moderna latinoamericana* (2015). More recent contributions include Amanda M. Smith's *Mapping the Amazon: Literary Geography after the Rubber Boom* (2021) and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz's *Imagining the Plains of Latin America: An Ecocritical Study* (2021). Some useful collections are *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings* (2010), edited by Adrian Taylor Kane; *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature* (2016), edited by Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora; and *Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World* (2019), edited by Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis, and Elizabeth Pettinaroli. These titles are just a few ex-

amples of a thriving area of study.

The book is composed of five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to the detailed analysis of specific texts, while chapters 3 and 5 focus on the work of individual authors. Chapter 4 engages with questions of human/nonhuman subjectivity in various artistic expressions. Although there is no doubt that the study of literature is at the core of *The Poetics of Plants*, the title can be a little deceiving, as Wylie reaches other territories of cultural production, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, documentary film, and performance.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of two canonical poetic works from the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century: Rafael Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana* (1782) and Andrés Bello's "La agricultura de la zona tórrida" (1826). The author describes in detail the many instances in which plants appear in both poems, highlighting significant commonalities between the two, like their appeal to pathos. Wylie convincingly asserts that while both Landívar and Bello are heavily influenced by classical European modes of literary expression, mainly Virgil's *Georgics*, both texts also echo indigenous thought and are shaped by native ecologies. We can see this characteristic in how the texts blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman in ways that resemble indigenous animism. This is, arguably, the main strength of the chapter. Previous criticism of these two canonical works has focused much attention on the presence of classical Roman and Greek forms, symbols, and preoccupations. Wylie addresses previous criticism but offers illuminating commentary on how botanical presences can also be read as manifestations of indigenous imaginaries. Astutely, Wylie does not fall into the temptation of overlooking the violence underlying the representations of crops and agriculture more generally, acknowledging contradictions in each text. She carefully describes how both authors evoke images of war and makes us reflect on how agricultural projects called to support national emancipation were in-

deed violent enterprises resulting in ecological devastation. Overall, Wylie persuasively argues that plants were fundamental in the national projects and human-nonhuman relations imagined by these two texts. At the end of chapter 1, she takes a leap into twenty-first-century Argentina with the discussion of Samanta Schweblin's novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014). Perhaps the case to bring these three works together in the same chapter could have been strengthened, but the discussion serves as a reminder of how relevant eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts can be to our times and the continuities that can be traced by studying the presence of plants in Spanish American literature.

In chapter 2, Wylie continues her reexamination of canonical literary works from the perspective of critical plant studies. In this case, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841) and Jorge Isaac's *María* (1867) are at the center. As the author points out, the coincidences between the two novels are numerous, lending themselves to a fruitful comparative analysis. Both novels turn to floriography, the language of plants, to distance themselves from well-established European tropes. Wylie reminds us that there is much debate on the implications of racial and gender discourses in *Sab*. The critic proposes that carefully examining botanical references in the novel can help us settle some of these debates—or, depending on where one stands, add wood to the fire. Similarly, in *María*, a careful reading of plant symbolism elucidates underlying native mythologies that enable feminist readings of the novel. Wylie's examination of human-nonhuman relations in these two canonical novels is not one of unwavering positions but of contradictions and complexities. Such a stand is supported by *Sab*'s and *María*'s ambivalent relation to nature, channeling colonial notions of horticulture while at the same time resisting its constraints. Wylie's thorough description of how characters in both novels are used to channel various perspectives on the natural world helps us better understand the plant discourses at play in the

novels, from colonial floriography and plantation capitalism to the arboreal imagery associated with indigenous traditions and destabilization of Romantic plant-related tropes.

Wylie again makes a temporal leap forward in chapter 3, this time into the middle of the twentieth century. With a slightly different approach than in the first two chapters, which discuss at length specific works, chapter 3 focuses on multiple works by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier and the movement—neo-baroque—commonly associated with his work. The discussion on the profound and continuous presence of plants in colonial baroque and neo-baroque movements in Spanish America is illuminating. To trace this continuity and its manifestation in Carpentier’s work, Wylie meticulously identifies the centrality of plants in the author’s fiction and essays, as well as Cuban neo-baroque aesthetics more generally. Wylie describes how plants flourished among different New World baroque artistic expressions, including architecture and painting, and how, in turn, they shaped Carpentier’s thought and literary production. A particular strength of this chapter is the exploration of how key traits (hybridity, metamorphosis) and conceits (metonymic displacement, curiosity cabinet) of the baroque in Spanish America are intimately related to botanical figurations.

In terms of the analytical approach and selection of texts, it is in chapter 4 where Wylie takes the most risks. In this chapter, she decenters the close reading of well-known texts to favor a more general interrogation of notions related to human/nonhuman subjectivities in fiction, poetry, folktales, performance, and documentary film. Canonical texts are still present in this chapter, as a significant part is devoted to the analysis of José Eustasio Rivera’s novel *La vorágine* (1924) to underline its “plant-centered poetics” (p. 138). Wylie argues that in *La vorágine* we find familiar Western rhetorical figures, such as anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia, that move beyond human-centeredness and foreshadow environmental discourses

more in line with those emerging since the middle of the twentieth century. The analysis of Rivera’s novel is followed by attentive readings of Juan Carlos Galeano’s poetry volume *Amazonia* (2003) and folktales collection *Cuentos amazónicos* (2007); the film *The Trees Have a Mother* (2008), co-directed by Galeano and Valliere Richard Auzenne; and Ana Mendieta’s performance-based series *Árbol de la vida* (1976). Wylie sees as a unifying thread in these works their use of personification and the construction of vegetal-human hybrids that invoke indigenous American myths and reconfigure human-plant relations. Although this chapter can feel less unified when compared to the other four, readers will appreciate the connections traced as a source of inspiration for exploring uncharted critical territories.

The critical approach in chapter 5 is midway between that of the first two chapters and chapter 3. The discussion focuses on the work of Pablo Neruda, although most of it is devoted specifically to his encyclopedic poem *Canto general* (1950). Wylie characterizes the Chilean author as someone “who merges the roles of poet and botanist” to create a plant catalog of the Americas “within a poetic framework” (p. 172). A critical concept in this chapter is that of “vegetable-thinking” (p. 187). According to the author, Neruda’s work anticipates current posthuman debates by seeing the lives of plants as a paradigm from which humans have much to learn in terms of collaboration, community, communication, regeneration, and temporality. Neruda’s mode of “vegetable-thinking” is, nonetheless, an intellectual project inseparable from his political position, as it supported the Marxist belief in a classless society based on such values as equality, unity, and fraternity. *The Poetics of Plants* ends with a short afterword, where Wylie briefly examines the volume *Árboles de Buenos Aires* (1979), a collaboration between Argentinian author Silvina Ocampo and her conational photographer Aldo Sessa. Although undoubtedly relevant to the book’s overall argument, the brevity of this analysis contrasts with the expansiveness and

detail of previous chapters, which leaves the reader wanting a little more.

*The Poetics of Plants* is an ambitious study in both temporal and critical scope. Among its many strengths is Wylie's ability to perform meticulous textual analyses of botanical representations in Spanish American cultural productions while establishing connections to the work of an impressive number and range of other authors. Literary critics and thinkers concentrated on Latin America are joined by Galen, Aristotle, William Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva, and Elaine Scarry, among many others, in the conversations taking place in the pages of *The Poetics of Plants*. Another one of its strengths is Wylie's acknowledgment that indigenous modes of perception have been determinant to the redefinition of human-plant relations in the works she analyzes. For example, Wylie often finds Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work on perspectivism helpful, and she joins other critics who have revalued the notion of anthropomorphism in Latin America not as "a repetition of a Western trope" but as a device with the ability to evoke less anthropocentric ways of conceiving human-non-human relations, like indigenous animism (p. 7).

It is not lost on the reader that the most recurrent plant species discussed in the book is the *Ceiba pentandra*, a species that, Wylie reminds us, has great significance in Spanish America, particularly among indigenous communities, as its many names and diverse symbolism attest. The beautiful illustration of a ceiba tree on the cover of the book not only announces its main argument—that just as the centenary tree, plants more generally have been a constant presence in Spanish American artistic expressions—but is also a metaphor for Wylie's scholarly project, one that is centered and expansive at the same time. Like in the case of a ceiba tree, one can imagine that many new and exciting branches will grow out of the critical trunk set by *The Poetics of Plants*. Wylie shows us that the study of plants in Latin American literat-

ure is a fertile and exciting direction of Hispanic literary criticism that, hopefully, many more will follow.

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