In engaging Latin America’s colonial, post-imperial, and republican histories, it is easy to see where the vegetal emerges as a key actor and receptor in economic, political, and cultural shifts. The crops that have come to dominate, weaving their history with the plantation and its ensuing politics, have created what Sylvia Wynter has argued is a monolithic narrative.[1] To name some of the region’s most defining monocrops—sugar, bananas, and soy—is to evoke the series of (neo)colonial relations the crops’ planting and cultivation inaugurated. Recent studies of American monocrops, such as Kregg Hetherington’s *The Government of Beans* (2020) on soy in Paraguay, reflects this by drawing on Timothy Morton’s work on the hyperobjects of climate change to engage the conception of the crop as more than a localized vegetal presence.[2] By applying Morton’s work to the vegetal, Hetherington addresses how the entanglements soy instantiated made of it a “character [of the Anthropocene] whose way of being was complex enough to at times seem benign, at others terrifying.”[3] By tracing the affective complexity of these entanglements, such vegetal actors take us, as Sidney Mintz suggests, from “one child’s sweet tooth to the history of slavery, of war, and corporate lobbying of Congress”.[4]

Environmental scholarship recognizes the role of monolithic crops such as sugar and how it has framed Latin America as the setting of extraction and extractivist politics that highlights the role of crop in imperial demands and foreign expansionist plans.[5] Curiously, as Christine Folch has noted, “yerba mate failed for centuries to penetrate the non-Latin American world” and, as such, it necessitates that we “trace the commodity’s path through an alternative consumption/production circuit that evades the global north.”[6] It is within this context that Rebekah Pite examines yerba mate as a South American commodity that is produced and consumed in the region. Pite writes against the persistence in scholarship of a
description of Latin America as extractive zone. Pite’s line of argument to this point is clear throughout the work and by drawing on the competing interests within the yerba market. She successfully makes the case for the cycle of production and consumption remaining within South America—even as Pite recognizes the repeated attempts at exporting and marketing the product to the United States and Europe, leading up to its co-opting by contemporary health and superfood movements in these regions.

Pite’s work is most interesting and successful when she frames South America as producer of yerba mate and follows the growth and decline of movements that promoted yerba mate. The volume shifts in focus between four nations: Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil, according to yerba mate’s popularity and the centers of its production. Pite begins with a discussion of the Paraguayan herb that adds much-needed context to the cultivation of the plant and the origins of the drink and politics surrounding its development from ka’a (the Guaraní name for the leaf) to yerba mate. From here, she deftly navigates the changes in late colonial territory to trace how the widespread usage of ka’a crossed social classes with modifications that included the use of individual instead of communally shared glass bombillas (straws) by French emigrants that disrupted the communal aspects of the beverage. Of interest in this section for scholars of colonial-era plant studies is not only the classification of ka’a as the herb of Paraguay, but its previous classification as a mineral due to its emergence “from the ground without human intervention,” like silver or gold (p. 21). Not only does this equivalence imbricate colonial-era crop cultivation and mining ventures, it serves also as a point of entry for understanding the possible recategorizations of plants in the colonial era alongside, if not against, Indigenous vegetal knowledges.

Pite also navigates the competing claims made over the plant in the independence period, adding to a deeper transnational understanding of the plant’s place within nationalizing cultural discourse. In fact, there is much to be said for what this work offers to plant studies scholars whose work crosses national boundaries in the construction of new transnational vegetal cartographies. As a point of clarification, Pite states that for the Guaraní the word ka’a did not just apply to the plant used in preparing the beverage we now call yerba mate, but “extended beyond this leaf to all life-giving plants found in the forest, including weeds and foliage” (p. 16). Historians, such as Jorge Cañizares Esguerra in How to Write the History of the New World (2002), have argued that naming plants, as part of the process of plant specimen collection, was a fundamental to rewriting the history of the Americas to establish control over the area amid competing claims made by various European and imperial powers throughout Latin America’s colonial period. We see this same knowledge-based politic assumed by nineteenth-century nation-states, such as Costa Rica, which established national herbaria to ensure that knowledge produced about the country’s environment remained in the country.[7] As ka’a—a signifier for the life-giving plants—was replaced by Ilex paraguariensis in accordance with the Linnean naming system, Pite shows, companies in early-twentieth-century Brazil and Argentina attempted to employ the binominal system’s nationalizing attribution through renaming to Ilex brasiliensis and Ilex argentiensis legitima. Pite does not speak on this longer history of naming. Nevertheless, while this shows the reproduction of a late colonial politics of knowledge, perhaps the most ironic piece is that, for Argentina, Ilex argentiensis legitima is a name coined by the Argentine yerba company Mackinnon & Coehlo, whose founders were from Britain and Brazil respectively. I shall return to this point later.

The fight over yerba mate revolves principally around competing claims to its quality, origin, and consumption being associated with and claimed by different national spaces. So much of the
volume is concerned with the creation of national narratives aimed at increasing sales through nationalizing messages. Consequently, a majority of the volume’s argument draws on visual culture, from paintings to photographs and marketing campaigns, establishing representative trends and differences transhistorically and transgeographically. Often Pite’s engagement with these sources uncovers hard-to-locate relationships in the server/served paradigm of yerba mate consumption that we know were present. An example of this is her work on Carlos Enrique Pellegrini’s *Bailando el minuet en casa de Escalada* (Dancing the minuet in the Escalada’s house) from 1831. In this scene, not only does she locate Afro-descendant Argentinians in the process of making yerba for guests at a gathering, but Pite also argues that the first sip of a mate undertaken by its preparer to ensure it is ready can also be understood, in this case, not as an obligation to the served, but as part of her own enjoyment of the party: “perhaps, she is observing, or even spying, on partygoers” (p. 59). Highlighting the role of Afro-descendant servers within the preparation of mate and a proto-costumbrista party scene buttresses the work undertaken by other visual studies scholars. Daniela Bleichmar’s work, *Visible Empire* (2012), documents extensively how the production of variants of paintings at the turn of the nineteenth century revealed the hidden realities of late colonial life and the whitewashing of landscapes in erasing Afro-descendant or Indigenous figures. Pite’s work dialogues fantastically with such scholarship and furthers her reconstruction of the political and cultural at play within the South American region. This work on visual culture and the communal relations stoked by mate becomes more complex when considering the arguments made about photographic production, particularly for postcards.

In the creation of national narratives around yerba mate, Pite notes that Indigenous peoples, rural spaces, and figures such as the *gaucho* and *china* have been central to marketing mate as autochthonous product.[8] The arguments she establishes between the racial politics of the early republics and the contradictory and complex twentieth-century marketing of the different nations both to themselves and those outside of them provide insight into the ways in which mate has been framed as rural tradition. It should be noted that the rural associations of the beverage made its mass consumption in urban settings difficult, as well as among younger generations who were drawn to the more European trends of drinking coffee and tea. Pite’s argument, while not surprising given the influence of the positivist movement on ideas around race and immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, again cements how yerba mate elucidates these relations, and in fact, transgresses them.

Pite’s excellent visual and written analysis includes a vast number of primary sources produced by writers, painters, and naturalists from Europe and the United States. While the variety of sources constructs a strong and broad basis for the work’s argument, there is little engagement with the possible implications the origins of these resources have for the work’s argument. This is especially important in considering Pite’s use of yerba mate to imagine a South America outside of its (neo)colonial monocropping relation to North America or Europe. For example, in the case of the British and Brazilian duo Mackinnon and Coelho, their company deployed nationalizing Argentinian tropes in marketing itself to the Argentine public, but further information on the two would have clarified their stake in the market. The same holds true for the politics of European naturalist/explorers in Pite’s discussion of Frenchman Alfred Demersey’s journey around South America or British painter and soldier Emeric E. Vidal’s anti-Spanish sentiment in documenting the *mate del estribo* (goodbye mate) in 1820. For Pite’s argument these sources provide a rich view of yerba mate’s representation within South America for local markets. However, discussing the interventions of said foreign actors in this market would have clarified the book’s main claim that a focus on yerba mate
facilitates a move away from a view of Latin America as purely a zone of production imagined by the West or Europe and North America. I would note here, however, that Pite does address Latin America’s role in facilitating non-South American consumption of yerba mate when discussing the importation of yerba mate in Lebanon.

One of the main strengths of Pite’s work is her drawing on a conceptual framework that incorporates the drink’s preparation, the act of serving and being served, and the communal sharing of the beverage. These are features of Pite’s exploration of yerba mate that intersect with race, class, and gender politics (as I have briefly mentioned above), and the interplay between the values of sharing in yerba mate and collective action. From the introduction, as Pite shares her own experiences with yerba mate, sharing is fundamental to understanding the relations instantiated when one bombilla (straw) is used to consume the beverage from a shared mate (gourd cup). This argument really concerns Pite’s reference of Benedict Anderson’s extremely well-cited work *Imagined Communities* (1983)—although Pite seemingly replaces Anderson’s focus on newspapers with the culture surrounding yerba mate. Several instances of this collective action come as she discusses pro- and anti-dictatorial movements. These are poignant moments as they stand in contrast to the neocolonial politics of naming mentioned earlier. They establish how yerba mate was used to re-create national and community ties that, in referencing Sylvia Wynter’s assertion cited earlier, go against the nation-state’s monolithic narratives. Through yerba mate, then, we can understand the reimagining of relations that allow for a mobility of collective action that mirrors a current turn in plant studies that looks to the vegetal to see how we can navigate the world anew and make further visible our human/nonhuman entanglements.

Notes


[2]. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Timothy Morton pulls directly from his work on object-oriented ontology to further define the “hyperobject” as non-local, viscous, weak, lame, hypocritical, and inter-objective (1-3).


[8]. Famously featured in José Hernández’s epic poem *Martín Fierro* (1872), the *gaucho*, or South American cowboy, roamed the grasslands of South America and came to be associated with a rural culture increasingly under threat of extinction in the nineteenth century. As a counterpart to rural masculinity, the *china* embodies the stereotyped role of women in rural spaces, although she is also associated with nineteenth-century Mexico’s urban spaces and her ability to navigate the class system with her beauty and economic freedom. See María del Carmen Vázquez Mantecón,

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