



Short communication

## Requiem for the weeds: Reflections in Amsterdam city park

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## ABSTRACT

Human and plant relationships are described within the rich tradition of multispecies ethnography, ethnobotany, and political ecology. In theorizing this relationship, the issues of functionalism, and interconnectivity are raised. This article aims to re-examine the position of plants in the context of contemporary urban spaces through the prism of environmental ethics. Despite conceptual plurality and socio-cultural complexity of human–plant relationships, social scientists fail to note how the perception of ‘greenery’ has objectified plants in urban environment. Without seriously considering bioethics, theories of human–plant relationship might fail to note exploitive anthropocentric relationship between humans and plants in urban spaces. The article is inspired by reflections of urban flora in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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### 1. Introduction

This boy really belonged to the age, millions of years ago, when the earth's would-be forests cried at birth among the marshlands newly sprung from the ocean's depth. . . The plant, vanguard of all living things on the road of time, had raised its joint hands to the sun and said, ‘I want to stay here, I want to live. I am an eternal traveler. Rain or sun, night or day, I shall keep travelling through death after death, towards the pilgrim's goal of endless life.’ That ancient chant of the plants reverberates to this day, in the woods and forests, hills and meadows, and the life of the mother earth declares through the leaves and branches, ‘I want to stay, I want to stay.’ The plant, speechless foster mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny; has gathered the sap, the vigour, the savour of life for the earth's immortal store; and raised to the sky the message of beleaguered life, ‘I want to stay’. Balai could here that eternal message of life in a special way in his bloodstream. We used to laugh at this a good deal (Tagore, 2009 R. Tagore [1928] 2009:257).

Plants previously appearing on the margins of social sciences – as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols – have been pressed into the foreground within political ecology, ethnobiology, and environmental sociology. In anthropology, multispecies ethnographies explored how non-human species have been pressed into the foreground as recent ethnographies take aim at “species” as a

grounding concept for articulating biological difference and similarity (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 545).

Ethnobotany drew on insights from cultural theory and ecology in addressing styles of knowledge and belief about plant life mediated through cultural values (Hunn, 2007). Ethnobotanists discussed topics ranging from natural and cultural history of tequila on US – Mexico borderlands (Valenzuela-Zapata & Nabhan, 2004) to bioprospecting and political economy in Mexico (Hayden, 2003). Once confound to the realm of features of landscape, or food for humans, or symbols, plants have started to appear alongside humans in political ecology (e.g., Helmreich, 2009; Lowe, 2006; West, 2006). Feminist anthropologists pointed out that social scientists have to turn their attention to the making and remaking of biological knowledge, substance, and relatedness (e.g., Strathern, 1992).

However, the critiques have noted that even as “the human” shares the stage with ‘the plant’ the discussion remains anchored in human perceptions and interpretations of plants, addressing questions of relatedness, exchange, governmentality, and signification (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010).

According to the concept of biosociality (Rabinow, 1999), plants might be categorized in different categories, such as domesticated (and useful) or wild (potential natural resources), culturally significant but morally undifferentiated. In the long standing tradition of constructivism, nature, wilderness and biodiversity are perceived through cultural, social, political or economic lens. Social scientists working in constructivist position argue that there exist no unmediated representations of nature for the latter are anchored in the social concepts – ‘concepts indelibly inscribed within the ways of knowing that generate such representations’ (Crist, 2004, p. 500). For urban plants, this has a number of significant implications, both practical – the way the plants are actually treated, and theoretical

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– the way social scientists interpret this treatment. In this article we shall explore the human agency in cultivation (as in the case of planted forests), harvesting (as in the case of crops) or destruction (as in the case of weeds) of plant species through both theoretical lens of environmental ethics and through the case study.

The failure of the current ethical framework to explicitly address the needs (and the very survival of) non-human species calls for an exploration of alternative paradigms. This article aims to examine what alternative approach to representation of plants is possible. How do these insights about the relationship between plants and humans instruct our understanding of everyday environment that most of the readers of this article are exposed to – urban ‘green’ spaces? In this article, we shall explore the Dutch urbanites’ perception of plants through the case study of a city park in Amsterdam. The case study carried out between May 2011 and May 2012 involved observation of its plant inhabitants as well interviews with human visitors and park workers.

### 1.1. Plants debates

Stone proposed in a 1972 paper titled “Should Trees Have Standing?” that if corporations are assigned rights, so should natural objects such as trees. The book was a rallying point for the then burgeoning environmental movement, launching a worldwide debate on the basic nature of legal rights that reached the US Supreme Court. In the 35th anniversary edition, Stone (2010) updated his original thesis and explored the impact his ideas have had on the American courts, the academy, and society as a whole. At the heart of the book is a compelling argument that the environment should be granted legal rights and why trees and the environment as a whole should be bestowed with legal rights, so that the voiceless elements in nature are protected.

In Switzerland, The Executive Federal Council directed the Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology (ECNH) and produced the report: *The dignity of living beings with regard to plants: Moral consideration of plants for their own sake*. The report maintained that the dignity of creatures including plants should be respected. The Federal Constitution has established three forms of protection for plants: the protection of biodiversity, species protection, and the duty to take the dignity of living beings into consideration when handling plants. The constitutional term “living beings” encompasses animals, plants and other organisms (ECNH, 2008).

ECNH was inspired by many discoveries in recent years that suggest that plants in fact might be sentient beings. Koechlin (2009, p. 78) inquires: But what could be the consequences of these new findings? How should we approach this situation of ‘not knowing’? *Dignity* in terms of plants is a difficult concept; it is religiously charged and comes from history of mankind. However, the notion could be understood as a sign, a metaphor, that plants are entitled to a value, a worth independent of human interests. *Dignity* could be a sign that plants are to be respected and that there are also certain obligations towards them. . .

If we look at plants as simple things, passive machines that follow the same set of programs, if plants are only seen as organisms satisfying our interests and demands, then an attribute like *dignity* seems absurd; it does not make sense. But if we see plants as active, adaptable, perhaps even as living beings capable of subjective perceptions, possessing their lives on their own, independent of us; then there is good reason to accept that plants have *dignity* that is valid. . .

The discussion of the dignity of plants is still miles away from this point. Anything and everything can be done with plants today; there is no ethical consideration, no awareness of any

problem. But it is slowly getting harder to justify this attitude toward plants (Koechlin, 2009:78)

In a mocking article *The Silent Scream of the Asparagus*, Smith (2008, p. 3) termed “plant dignity” a ‘symptom of a cultural disease that has infected Western civilization’ Using overtly anthropocentric terms harking back to the Biblical invocation of Man as the ruler of the universe, Smith continues:

Our accelerating rejection of the Judeo-Christian world view, which upholds the unique dignity and moral worth of human beings, is driving us crazy. Once we knocked our species off its pedestal, it was only logical that we would come to see fauna and flora as entitled to rights. The intellectual elites were the first to accept the notion of “species-ism”, which condemns as invidious discrimination treating people differently from animals simply because they are human beings. Then ethical criteria were needed for assigning moral worth to individuals, be they human, animal, or now vegetable (Smith, 2008:3).

In his Letter to the Editor entitled *Bioethics: On the road to absurd land*, Simcha Lev-Yadun (2008) expressed his fear that the discussion going on in Switzerland about the dignity of plants could lead us down to an absurd and dangerous path as progress in medicine and agriculture could be slowed as a result.

## 2. Environmental ethics

Environmental ethics deal with questions of assignment of intrinsic values and, in prolongation, moral rights and what these rights entail (Vincent, 1992). Regan (1983), for example, advocates the intrinsic value to all mammals including humans due to their supposed mental capacities that include the ability to have beliefs, memory and some kind of sense of the future. Singer (1977) is less restrictive and advocates the intrinsic value to all creatures that are able to experience pain, implying that human beings must justify needless suffering of sentient beings. According to Singer, plants can be seen as sentient beings since “There is no reliable evidence that plants are capable of feeling pleasure or pain”. Similarly, in “Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany” Hall (2011) challenges readers to reconsider the moral standing of plants and discusses the moral background of plants in western philosophy. Hall argued that as the human assault on nature continues, more ethical behavior toward plants is needed.

In fact, recent scientific articles have revealed that plants are active in sensing numerous parameters from their environment, communicate extensively and actively; they interact with their surroundings. On the cellular level, similarities between animals and plants are far greater than previously assumed communication with electrical action potentials, similar vesicle trafficking and signaling molecules, etc. (Koechlin, 2009). What would follow, as Singer has reasoned before this evidence was revealed, is that we should minimize the amount of pain we cause in the course of preserving our lives.

Taylor (1986) holds that all life has inherent values and argues for respect for plants:

As moral agents we might think of ourselves as under an obligation not to destroy or injure a plant. We can also take the standpoint of a plant and judge what happens to it as being good or bad from its standpoint. To do this would involve our using as the standard of evaluation the preservation or promotion of the plant’s own good. Anyone who has ever taken care of flowers, shrubs, or trees will know what these things mean (Taylor, 1986:67)

Taylor’s biocentrism would require vast changes in our lives and in society that could be compared with the changes in thought,

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