

Call for Papers for the Workshop

Plant Intimacies: Proximity, care and violence


Berlin, 20-21 October 2022

Freie Universität Berlin & Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient

Convenors: Hilal Alkan and Sandra Calkins

Recent social science literature on plants highlights love, care, affect and emotions that emerge between plants and their human caretakers. While at times this begins to sound like a love story, much has also been written about the violence and killing involved in such intimate relations. A related strand of scholarship stresses that in view of not only overbreeding and monoculture but also travelling pests, pathogens and fungi, many plants today are extremely vulnerable, threatened by extinction and could not survive without continuous human care and labor. Arguably, all of this amounts to a simple yet provocative point: instead of understanding human-plant relations in terms of evolution, what we in fact see is “involution”, or drawing increasingly closer together through intimate activities that mold human-plant co-becoming (Hustak & Myers 2012).

By foregrounding human intimacy with plants, beings that are mostly rooted in soil, we also draw attention to proximity, and to the concrete places where plants grow and are cultivated. These can be fields, plots, pots, windowsills, roadsides, as well as laboratories and greenhouses. The specific affective relations that develop between plant and human beings and the spatial constellations of their relations often entail historical groundings, cultural attachments, aesthetic ideals and narrations of belonging and origin. Such affective relations also feed into reinventions of home, citizenship, and mobility. Thinking with plants, their places and their intimacies, whether desired or unwanted, helps to foreground well-trodden but largely unrecognized connections and relations. And this, in turn, might perhaps allow us think, plant and narrate less predictable and less human-centered storylines.



Taking all of this as fertile grounding, this workshop seeks to critically interrogate the idea of plant intimacies and explore forms of more-than-human labor and care in the places they occur. It asks: Where and what exactly are these intimacies with plants? What does the choice of such affectively charged language mean for our theorizing humble, quotidian, often barely noticed, and generally earth-bound more-than-human relationships? Is it possible to explore bonding, codependency, discipline and relational becomings from such vantages? And what lessons can be drawn from such perspectives to address our planetary environmental crisis?

Possible fields and themes to explore (although not limited to):

- Hands-on care of plants (farming, gardening, breeding etc.)
- Scientific work with and on plants (botany, plant neurobiology, evolutionary biology etc.)
- Indigenous ethics and ontologies of multispecies conviviality
- Emergent human-plant relations and encounters in shifting contexts: displacement and migration, disaster, war and extraction
- Homemaking with plants
- Affective knowledge of plants and feminist/decolonial epistemologies
- Species selection and introduction in urban planning, garden and landscape design

This exploratory workshop will bring together scholars working on human-plant relations across the social sciences and humanities and in a range of sociocultural, historical and political contexts. The event will involve presentations based on pre-circulated research papers, a roundtable debate on emerging notions in multispecies studies and critical plant studies, and an excursion. A special issue publication is envisaged. Please send a 300-word abstract and a 100-word bio to hilal.alkan.zeybek@zmo.de and s.calkins@fu-berlin.de. The deadline for applications is 20 January 2022.

Reference cited:

Hustak, Carla & Natasha Myers. 2012. "Involuntary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters." *Differences* 23(3): 74-118.