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Stella Sandford.
Vegetal Sex: Philosophy of Plants

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tella Sandford's *Vegetal Sex: Philosophy of Plants* invites readers into the problematics and possibilities of relation through vegetal life. Sandford's approach sits with the histories of western botanical and philosophical traditions to shed light on the ways in which plant sexuality has been conceptualised, hoping to cultivate a more generous approach to plant philosophy. I read this text as a political ecologist and multispecies scholar interested in the often-queer vegetal politics of production and reproduction and, like Sandford, what those politics may reveal about the question of the human. Sandford investigates how sex has been characterised and understood in the history of botany; why animalistic metaphors have dominated these understandings; and how a turn to plant perspectives invites the deeper question that grounds the text: *What is sex* in the first place?

Vegetal Sex thinks philosophy with plant science, historicising both disciplines as intertwined approaches to understanding vegetal life. Histories of western thought are paired with analyses of the discourse of vegetal sex in scientific and popular literature, ending with a discussion of the ways in which Indigenous philosophies of vegetal relations may provide the tools for better understanding what Sandford references as the failure of Western metaphysics to account for vegetal life. In doing so, Sandford urges a stronger critique of the dominance of the animal

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model – including zoocentrism and anthropomorphism – arguing that more careful attention to a plant philosophy that 'grows in the cracks of botany' (p. 29) is needed. Further, that discussions of sexuality from the perspective of the 'radical alterity of plant life' (p. 14) – incommensurabilities and all – can open spaces for deeper understandings of sex, sexuality and gender across species and life forms.

The text reads like an extended meditation on the intertwined histories of western botany and philosophy, ending with fruitful meeting points between western anthropological thought and Indigenous philosophies, not to seek answers to but to expand the questions of subjectivity, humanity, care and connection. Sandford's somewhat recursive writing style keeps one invested in the central questions and motifs of the text as she moves through the details of conceptual shifts in understandings of plant life at different historical and intellectual junctures. The introduction raises the central contradiction and concern, that of zoocentrism in conceptualisations of vegetal sex, and the promise of plant philosophy. The first chapter delves into this discussion of plant philosophy, as a turn away from and critique of plant advocacy, moving through the peculiarities of plant life – including sensing, modularity, intelligence, plasticity, individuality, and the ambiguity of life and death – emphasising how the radical alterities of plants are a challenge of and contribution to Western metaphysics. Chapter 2 takes it back to Aristotle to think through plant sex in the Western philosophical tradition, introducing the importance of thinking critically about the role of analogy in the differences between plant and animal being. The third chapter thinks the histories of scientific botany and western philosophy together to investigate shifting conceptions of the metaphysical classifications of 'male' and 'female' for plants, which the following chapter builds on, tracing the shift from analogy to identity in the writings of Camerarius, Vaillant and Linnaeus, and the resultant ambiguities between literal and metaphorical understandings of vegetal sex, as well as the blending of male and female with function, organ and individual.

From there, Chapter 5 makes a turn toward the sexed terminology in scientific literature – including popular communication – as well as deviations from strict meanings. Here, Sandford engages with the dibiontic life cycle (the alternation of generations) to more fully display the complexity of the issue with identity and metaphor as it pertains to vegetal sex – notably through the re/locating of sex and

sex cells – landing on discussions of more relational, community level epistemologies of vegetal sex. The sixth chapter returns to the rigorous conceptual discussion of the politics of 'male' and 'female' for plant life and the possibilities of alternative vegetal community formations through engagements with the maternal botanical imaginary, mycorrhizal networks and Indigenous philosophies, thinking with Kimmerer and Turner, as well as Viveiros de Castro's offerings of perspectivism and multi-naturalism as points of synergy and possibility. Finally, the Epilogue seeks to tease apart homology from analogy and sex from sexuality in order to find common ground for a more generous discussion of vegetal sex – one that acknowledges the analogies and similarities as well as their limits, cultivating a landscape of futurity and possibility for plants and animals alike.

The conceptual review of plant advocacy and plant philosophy that opens the text would speak well to an environmental humanities or even science communication classroom, while much of the discussion in the central thrust of the book would be generative in an undergraduate history of science syllabus. The thinkers of the Western canon are presented in an accessible and straightforward way that Sandford uses to illustrate a historical progression of key conceptual touchstones. The insistence on the role of philosophy would also enliven discussions of the epistemologies of Western science and the ways they ghost through present day botanical discourse. The conceptual work toward the end of the text would work well for graduate seminars seeking to constellate between multispecies relations, vegetal politics and queer ecologies, especially in ways that seek a more open, critical discussion of the nonhuman.

Where this text shines is in Sandford's insistence on its central motif – how an investigation of vegetal sex, from the question of what it means to be a plant, leads to the more fundamental question of what is sex? And what work is being done with and by sexed terminology as deployed in scientific and philosophical discourse. Sandford is careful to map out these differing conceptions of male and female as they've arisen at different historical junctures, including the sexing of entire plants, the sexing of plant parts, the sexing of plant behaviour and the sexing of the perceived metaphysical orientations of plants (or parts of plants) at different points in their life cycles. Concepts like male and female become conceptually unbound and instead resemble a patchwork of possibilities, orientations and processes in the reproduction of self and community, as

well as a relational way through which organisms can situate themselves among larger multispecies landscapes. This is supported by a rhetorical emphasis on holding space for radical alterity and incommensurability across multispecies worlds. As Sandford asks, 'But what if the freak is normal? What if the neat typology is the problem?' (p. 124), and further 'What if, when both animals and plants are sexed, 'sex' becomes a wholly other thing?' (p. 153)

The radical otherness of sex comes to function in this text as less a point of study and more an invitation to indulge in the possibilities of being and relating with self and with multispecies community, and it is here that I was left wanting a more rigorous political analysis. The power relations of masculinity and heteronormativity in the discussion of western plant thought – whose words are recorded, whose conceptualisations are remembered, whose ideas end up influencing botanical research centuries after the fact – are always ghosting in the background when not brought to the forefront, notably through Linnaeus's notorious marriage bed analogies. Yet this discussion could be enriched by a sustained analysis of these power relations and how they may also shed light on the knowledge politics of which forms of plant knowledges get canonised, how Indigenous knowledges are taken up (or not), and the political possibilities that may emerge.

If, as Sandford argues, the anthropomorphising of vegetal sexuality shows 'nothing at all about plants but quite a lot about humans and their dominant gender and sexual ideologies' (p. 159), then the opening of a more generously vegetal sex can also provide a more radically alternative set of human possibilities for, and politics of, relation: a human sex that 'also just is, without the burden of any ought' (p. 160), an approach that 'would not be to deny the biological reality of vegetal sex as a human species trait but to affirm the psychosocial and historical determination of our sexed and/or gendered identities and to accept their open futures' (p. 161). We could all stand to be a little gayer in our scholarship as well as our lived multispecies relations, and a deeper engagement with radically queer human politics might benefit this discussion. Opening the door to an embrace of freakishness and deviance through vegetal sex should also come with a stronger engagement with histories and presents of non/normalcy – of bodies, relations, and lifeways – as an often-violent political tool. Holding these in tension may make radical new politics – human and nonhuman – possible.

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