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► To cite this version:

Emilia Sanabria, Silvia Mesturini. Introduction: Plot-ting PhytoFutures. *American Anthropologist*, 2023, 125 (3), pp.673-678. 10.1111/aman.13863 . halshs-04231503

HAL Id: halshs-04231503

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04231503>

Submitted on 6 Oct 2023

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Introduction: Plot-ting PhytoFutures

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST - VITAL TOPICS FORUM: PHYTOFUTURES

Emilia SANABRIA & Silvia MESTURINI

Phyto – derived from the Greek *phýein*, meaning “to bring forth, produce, to grow, spring up”¹ and forming words with the sense “of relating to, or resembling (that of) a plant.”²

Future – that is to be, relating to, or constituting a tense expressive of time yet to come.

PhytoFutures – speculative gestures of bringing forth, growing, and multiplying that-which-is-to-be-with-plants through collective imaginative practices.

Plot – “African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa, the land remained the Earth – and the Earth was a goddess . . . his funeral was the mystical reunion with the Earth. . . . Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he created on the plot a folk culture. . . . This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system” (Wynter, 1971).



You are delicious. So delicious that many moons ago our Ancestors made a sacred pact with your Ancestors, who consented to feed you to us once life left your bodies. Tenderly, in myriad elaborate funerary rituals, you gave your dead to us. Together with our fungi kin, we digest you and thrive from the compost that you become. Plant ones eat human ones (and many things besides) and human ones eat plant ones (and many things besides, all of which eat plant ones). Eating each other for millennia, humans and plants literally grew from one another, knowing (with) each other in deep, intimate ways. The rise of Man³ (Wynter, 1995, 2003) rendered (some) humans incapable of continued intimacy with plants, even mystified about the respectful intimacies that Indigenous peoples around the world maintained with plants. Jealous, perhaps, of the secrets still shared between plants and humans when love and respect prevail.

Man made a science of itself. “Anthropology,” it was called. A beautiful, archaic, egotistical science to document its own demise and fantasize its origins. For as the death of Man loomed, Men obsessed with identity, purity, and creation stories. Even as it strove to think relationality beyond its queer idea of self, it did so by reference to itself, referring to the beings that were not it as “nonhuman,” “other-than-human,” “more-than-human,” needing transcendental spatial “beyonds” (Jackson, 2015) to unthink

¹ “Phyto-.” Merriam-Webster website. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phyto->.

² Oxford English Dictionary.

³ For Sylvia Wynter, the generic figure “Man” at the heart of the huManities was constituted in two phases: Man1 arose in the European Renaissance as Man gradually moved along a secularizing trajectory out of his divinely given place to assume the place of *homo politicus*, defined along the polarity of ir/rational. In the European Enlightenment, Man1 morphed into bio-economic Man2, a generic Man constituted through racialized, evolutionist, and colonial epistemes against the “dysselected” others that Europeans were encountering and governing post-1492.

itself. Fundamentally, it was incapable of conceptualizing alterity (Ferreira da Silva, 2007; Irigaray, 1984). For the science of Man had been oblivious: defining, abstracting, and generalizing—in other words, invisibilizing—all that it excluded (Stengers, 2020). The loss of relationality—as a space of encounters—and the abstraction and the treatment of beings (such as plants) as objects led those who were objectified to no longer encounter those objectifying through reciprocal cycles of co-feeding. They became predators, devouring those who broke the pact (as shown by Fausto, 2007; Lagrou, 2020; Vilaça, 2016; Viveiros de Castro, 2012). Given that plants operate on such radically altered temporal and spatial scales to those of Man2, the decaying phallogentric, heroic science of Man struggled to think itself beyond the perspective offered by the animal, particularly the predatory animal. It was hard for Man2 to fathom a root colony tens of thousands of years old (Ding et al., 2017) when his whole outlook could only see the individual (Sagan and Margulis, 1991) that hid the rhizome in plain sight. The problem was that Man2 was unable to think relationality beyond fixist conceptions of friend or foe, predator or symbiont. Taking life with love, harvesting ceremoniously (Kimmerer, 2014), incorporating others into one oneself required queer (Boyce, Gonzalez-Polledo, and Posocco, 2021), pluribiotic (Brives, 2021) approaches to relationality in which relations are understood to be forever emergent and contextual. Laura Rival, who raised one of us, devoted a lifetime to thinking with plants, noting again and again how strange it is that plants figure so marginally in anthropological theory, given their centrality to Indigenous worlds (see, in particular, Rival, 2012). As Ursula Le Guin (1986) put it, the spell of the hunt, the stories men tell each other, colonized all storytelling, including—we may add (and as Kroeber's daughter, we think she would agree)—anthropological storytelling: "It wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story. The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains. . . . And we didn't even work hard at it" (165).

The process that gave rise to this collection of essays began during a week-long writing workshop in which we gathered around the common objective of unshackling the social and human sciences from anthropocentric imaginaries. During this week, we came together daily to practice a series of writing exercises offered by Afro-feminist troublemaker, poet, and scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs. In these writing exercises, and through her oeuvre, Gumbs offers ceremonies for allowing more-than-human stories to arise:

I had to understand that when I reached out for my ancestors I couldn't (like population geneticists do) just stop at some point of relation that would be marketably salient to my ego's prior understanding of who I am now. My listening began to include speakers who have never been considered human. (Gumbs, 2020, xii)

Inspired and enlivened by this week of thinking speculatively together, the idea of writing PhytoFutures emerged. We took writing PhytoFutures to be a means of recognizing how plants and humans co-labor (De la Cadena, 2021) in ways that render their differences irrelevant and arbitrary. PhytoFutures begin with love, desire, con-spiration, and the delight of eating one another (brown, 2019; Choy, 2020; Gumbs, 2020; Lorde, 1984; Mol, 2021; Stephens and Sprinkle, 2021; TallBear, 2018). Casting our net wider, we invited anthropologists, artists, poets, and STS, Chicanx, and Indigenous scholars thinking with, through, and alongside plants to ask questions such as: Which new forms of kinship with plants and other others can thrive in the ruins of colonization? What will it take for the biosciences and social sciences to truly, respectfully, humbly encounter Indigenous knowledges (Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, 2021; TallBear, 2011, 2014; Todd, 2016)? What are the speculative gestures that allow for nonlinear, interspecific, enmeshed, regenerative, socially just, and livable futures? What stories can we tell that partake in undoing dichotomies between wild and domesticated plants and teleologies that suggest a linear progression from domestication to agriculture to the plantation? What tales can be told about the encounters unfolding in gardens? Can we imagine that, maybe, humans are the ones cultivated by plants? As Natasha Myers

(2018)—another major inspiration for our project—so aptly put it: “We are of the plants.” Humanity arose in what she refers to as the “planthropocene,” a planet made “livable and breathable for animals like us” by “the green ones.”

Our collated explorations do not purport to offer an *N*th definitive perspective on “plants” or a comprehensive review of anthropology’s engagement with plants, from yams to banana leaf bundles, from *pensées sauvages* (wild pansies) to rhizomes, thinking forests, global sugar, and “the” plantationocene, to name but some of the iconic ways plants figure in the anthropological canon. Acknowledging the discipline’s long legacy of thinking with plants, we open a space here for a range of endeavors emerging from within and beyond anthropology that share three core commitments. The first is an effort—articulated from a range of divergent positions and disciplines—to write in ways that do not split experience into dichotomies of subject or object, native or ethnographer, this species or that. The second is rooted in the recognition that speculation is an integral part of world-building, something many Indigenous theories of the world playfully reveal and much scientific praxis still has much to gain from acknowledging. The third commitment that brings these texts together is an attempt to free plants from their capture as speciated Other, as objects of plantation. The papers gathered here do this in different ways. They explore human-plant encounters at the place where their distinctions come undone. As we held and thought with the variety of endeavors brought together to write these undoings, the possibilities held by *Phyto* became more apparent to us.

Alongside others before us (Jacobs, 2019; Vieira, 2016), we chose to favor the *Phyto*- prefix over the semantics of plants or the vegetal. This is not because we are fully satisfied with locating our proposal in Greek etymology but because we value the speculative valence that it holds open. The Latin *vegetalis/vegetare* indexes more directly notions of life (as related to growth) and in/animation that we altogether wish to sidestep. Indeed, one of our objectives is to partake in the breaking down of the “animacy structures” (Chen, 2012) that contain and distinguish the realms of vegetal, animal, and human.⁴ For us, *Phyto* opens from the speculative possibility of thinking life before Western classification systems separated plants from animals and those from humans and congealed them as things, not actions-in-becoming.

We do not adopt *Phyto* to center plants in place of humans (as Marder [2014] proposes with the notion of phytocentrism). Rather, we question the post-Aristotelian nounification of *Phyto* as the vegetal (as distinct from other life formations). Our aim is to speculatively engage with *Phyto* before (and after) its vegetalization. In this sense, it is anything but a novel proposition. It stands for what humans and plants and many others have long been doing. *Phyto* is a doing that engages many, more or less together, more or less simultaneously, whether named as individual beings or not, whether recognized as alive or not.

Delicately unveiling the “grammar of animacy,” Potawatomi ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer teaches that speaking Anishinaabemowin or Potawatomi and treating beings—plants, rocks, humans, animals, or even a bay or a day of the week—as people are inextricably entangled in one same gesture. Most of the words that compose those languages are verbs (70 percent compared to 30 percent in English). This signals a world where what counts is what beings do and not how they are classified (by humans).

A bay is a noun only if water is dead. . . . But the verb wiikwegamaa—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby

⁴ See, in particular, Chen (2012, 39–41).

mergansers. . . . To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. (Kimmerer, 2013, 54–55)

With the Greek *phýein*, we wish to re-verbicize the vegetal realm. *Phyto* as *phýein* springs up, grows, brings forth.

The Shipibo language does not have a generic term for the vegetal realm. *Rao* and the verb *raonti* refer to plants that can heal, to medicine, or to the act of healing (Tournon et al., 2014). One of our teachers, Shipibo healer and plant expert José Lopez Sanchez (see this forum), has taught us to think differently about what our disciplines generically refer to as “plants.” He teaches us that trees are not *plantas* (plants), that vines can shapeshift and become trees, or that many *plantas* are *maestras* (teachers, in the feminine) and have *madres* (mothers).

“Plant,” therefore, felt too partial or specific for what we are trying to grasp. To us, *Phyto* brought forth the whole vegetal realm and its radical interconnectedness in a way that “plant” could not. Plants felt too much like human individuals, reproducing in the vegetal realm human frames that we were trying to escape. After Man2, Plant2 . . .

Our objective is not to replace Generic Man with Generic Plant but to explore, speculate, and carve out spaces for Phyto-co-becomings. To *PhytoFuture* is to explore the possibility of storying with plants in anthropology at this particular juncture. Because, as Afro- and Indigenous futurists tirelessly remind us, “future” itself is a verb. We imagine *PhytoFutures* as part of the rhizome of *Afrofutures*, *Indigenous futures*, *speculative feminist futures*, *transfutures*, *nonableist and abolitionist futures* (Bishop, Higgins, and Määttä, 2020; Dillon, 2012; Haraway, 2016; Imarisha and Brown, 2015; López López and Coello, 2021). To future is to story with living worlds and to sustain imaginations, sensibilities, and attention toward the possibility of *Phyto* as future.

In her beautiful essay on plantation futures, McKittrick (2013) examines how the “protracted colonial logic of the plantation” ushered in the current present. What possible postplantation futures beyond prisons, anti-Black violence, and impoverishment can be made possible, she asks. “It is precisely because the plantation has ‘a built-in capacity to maintain itself’ that we would do well to reimagine its future,” McKittrick (2013, 5) warns. The humanities and social sciences have powerfully apprehended the transformation of human-Phyto interactions through analyses of plantation capitalism. (Davis et al., 2019; Jegathesan, 2021; McKittrick, 2013; Wynter, 1971). The monoculture of crops in plantations involves the alienation and transplantation of multiple species, radically transforming at unprecedented scale the co-nutritive relations between humans and their Phyto-kin. Black feminist theorizations of the plantation have pointed to key routes out of the sweeping universal, momentous operations of the plantation—with its built-in teleologies of development (see, in particular, Jegathesan, 2021; Moore and Arosoaie, 2021). One of these is the “plot” (Wynter, 1971), or provision ground where subsistence cultivars are nurtured, where joyful opportunities for care, “mutual safety, replenishment, rest” (Jegathesan, 2021, 5–6) flourish outside the “techniques of terror” (Wynter, 1971) of the plantation. Wynter’s (1971) *Novel and History, Plot and Plantation* grapples with the basic confrontation between the plantation and the plot: “The plantation was the superstructure of civilization; and the plot was the roots of culture. But there was a rupture between them, the superstructure was not related to its base, did not respond to the needs of the base, but rather to the demands of external shareholders and the metropolitan market. The plantation was run by the manager class, the colon class. This class and the labouring indigenous class faced each other barricades that are in-built in the very system which created them” (100.)

As DeLoughrey (2011:59) puts it, “the provision grounds reflect the historical plot of cultural sustainability amid the terrors of plantation capitalism, vital ground for the post-emancipation

period.” What is at stake, in sum, is how to challenge the normative plot of emancipation history? How to plot liberation in a way that does not leave “the basic [plantation] system untouched” (Wynter, 1971, 102). What secretive futures (after Wynter’s [1971] “secretive histories”) can we plot that decouple Phyto-worlds from conceptualizations of plants forged under plantation regimes? What implications would such PhytoFutures have for anthropology, the Science of Man(2)?

Should the discipline simply be allowed to burn to the ground and be devoured by the toxic flames of California’s wildfires (Jobson, 2020)? Perhaps the ashes of humanism would be quite the feast for the plant ones? “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn” (Jobson, 2020) raised essential questions about the liberal presuppositions, vacuous decolonial rhetorics, and ongoing structural and representational violence of the discipline, pointing to the fact that piecemeal diversification of the syllabus or the professoriate will not solve the challenges posed by the colonial history of the discipline.⁵

Would the plants (along with the millipedes, centipedes, springtails, nematodes, mites, protozoa, bacteria, Actinomycetes, and fungi) cheer? After all, they love the cleansing power of fire, the transmutations it facilitates and the nutrients it returns to the cycle that would otherwise remain captive in old vegetation (or the ivory of old towers, as Traweek [2020] astutely notes). Yet calling for the discipline to burn to the ground might also be seen as a troubling expression of anthropocentric omnipotence. Indeed, a corollary of Human-the-Hunter narratives are Human-Master-of-Fire narratives, as epitomized by Disney’s King Louie.⁶ According to one such prototypical evolutionary narrative of the rise of (bio-economic) Man2, Harvard biologist Richard Wrangham proposes that the human mastery of fire, and thereby of cooking, was a key determinant in the development of *the* organ that made language and culture possible: the brain. This theory makes cooking more than a metaphor for culture, turning it into its precondition.⁷ But plants have longer histories in their “vegetal minds” (Gagliano, 2018). Wildfires seem to have been an integral component of the Earth System for over 350 million years, since the development of vegetation on land (Scott, 2000). Our Phyto-Ancestors are likely well aware that their relationship to fire vastly predates the rise of Man. A review article published in the *New Phytologist* proposes that the world’s major vegetation patterns are actually determined by fire (Bond, Woodward, and Midgley, 2005).⁸ This work even points to an easily overlooked phenomenon: that “the origin of fire is tied to the origin of plants, which are responsible for two of the three elements essential to the existence of fire: oxygen and fuel” (Pausas and Keeley, 2009).

With this in mind, could we *let anthropology burn* in less totalizing, anthropogenic ways? Human pyrotechnics were not always those of Man2’s Totalizing Fire. Could we take inspiration in the myriad human-plant cooperative relationships with fire, such as fire-fallowing, slash-and-burn agriculture, or the practices of the Milpa: fires of right relationship. Could we imagine—indeed plot—a politics of burning that was neither totalizing nor concerned with purification, a pyrotechnical politics with other horizons than California’s not-so-wild anthropogenic fires? The texts we offer here are those that might flourish from such ashes.

⁵ See also the UCLA Department of Anthropology’s “Race, Racism, and its Reckoning in American Anthropology” webinar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScNbIWCRR4I>.

⁶ “Now don’t try to kid me, mancub; I made a deal with you; What I desire is man’s red fire; To make my dream come true; Give me the secret, mancub; Clue me what to do; Give me the power of man’s red flower; So I can be like you.” King Louie, *The Jungle Book*.

⁷ The problem is that the existing data does not seem to support the idea that humans controlled fire 1.6 million years ago when *Homo erectus*—whose brain was 50 percent larger than its predecessor’s—emerged.

⁸ More recent analyses suggest that fires predate anthropogenic burning by millions of years (Pausas and Keeley 2009).

Stories of decomposition (Lyons, 2020), nourishment, tending. We offer this banquet of ashes to the Plant Ones, paying tribute not with tobacco or sage, but with words.

In her response to Jobson, “After the Ash and Rubble Are Cleared: Anthropological Work for a Future,” Leniqueca A. Welcome (2021) warns that words are insufficient if they leave the material conditions of academia’s extractive methods, white supremacy, racism, classicism, ableism, hetero-patriarchy, sexual assault, or labor exploitation in place within anthropological departments. Inspired by Walidah Imarisha (Imarisha and Brown, 2015, 3), we see words as tools for the continued decolonization of the imagination, which she reminds us “is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.” Or, in the words of Kimmerer (2014, 347),

We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I’ve come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words to tell new ones, stories that bring science and spirit back together to nurture our becoming people made of corn.

Any future arising from the ashes of Man2 that is worth fighting and loving for is a PhytoFuture. PhytoFutures recognize that Planetary Commons are impossible without a vibrant, sustainable Phytosphere. They recognize co-feeding and co-breathing as our past and most desirable futures. In mobilizing notions of “future,” we imagine time as part of the decolonizing adventure (Rifkin, 2017), as nonlinear, nonanticipatory explorations of other ontological possibilities, of nonhuman perspectives, the spiraling connections and reconnections of emerging pasts and already-present futures. PhytoFutures thrive in the recognition that we are all, beyond our myriad differences, Breathing Ones. As Myers (2018) so evocatively puts it: “Pulling matter out of thin air, plants are conjurers, and they teach us the most nuanced lessons about *matter*. . . . They know how to compose livable, breathable, and nourishing worlds. As they exhale, they compose the atmosphere.”

Indigenous peoples who recognize plants as medicine, knowledge, food, and much more often understand humans as the younger children of the planetary family. “Plants were here first and have had a long time to figure things out. . . . Not only do they feed themselves, but they make enough to sustain the lives of all the rest of us. Plants are providers for the rest of the community and exemplify the virtue of generosity, always offering food” (Kimmerer, 2014, 346).

In this way, we the Phyto Ones celebrate the fact that you too can become food when you die. Inciteful humans now offer funerary human composting services, such as Recompose™, to enable you to “become soil when you die.”⁹ We the fungi and the plants, the composters, are not fussy eaters; we’ll eat pretty much anything. We have been whispering our sweet song to the creatives, planting ideas in them that will return you to our table. “Close the loop and become a source for new life to thrive” in the world’s purportedly “first” (bless them, they really can’t help their absurd competitiveness) “living coffin.”¹⁰ Given how toxic you became—and not just in the racist, sexist, hetero-patriarchal sense, but literally toxic-infused—some burial systems, such as myco-remediation burial suits, were developed to cleanse your corpse of the toxins you would otherwise release into the soil and waterways as you decompose.”¹¹

PhytoFutures will hopefully partake in liberating Indigenous and traditional knowledges from the absurd and imperious practice of Science, validating what had always already been known and shared through eons of intracellular intimacy that no biosemiotic analytics could even begin

⁹ “A full-service funeral home specializing in human composting, Recompose works directly with you and the people in your life to ensure respectful, empathetic service from the time of death through the body’s transformation into soil. We’re here to support you. Contact us at (206) 800-8733.” <https://recompose.life>, accessed on the Spring Equinox 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.loop-of-life.com/product>, accessed on the Spring Equinox 2022.

¹¹ <https://coeio.com>, accessed on the Spring Equinox 2022.

to exhaust. PhytoFutures dwell in the cracks opened in the wake of plantation-worlds devastation; they are the always-already-present regenerative forces and reconfigurations enabled through putrescence, rotting, and smoldering. We intend them to free up the plants and plant metaphors from plantation thinking through loving, careful searing, scorching, and decomposing. Thus, roots and trees need not serve only as metaphors for patriarchal orderings, genealogical purity, or cultural origins. They can be reclaimed as the places where bodies decompose and Phytofeasts take place. We PhytoFuture in the hope of lovingly freeing the vegetal from its capture and reification into Plant2—Man2’s Phyto-corollary—by postplantation imaginaries.

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