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Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation, Rosetta S. Elkin, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2022, xvi + 250 pp., £25 (paperback), 9781517912628

It is no surprise that a deepening awareness of ecological emergency has produced increasing interest in tree planting. Deforestation remains one of the most profound threats to biodiversity and environmental stability; planting new trees promises a ready-made counter-balance (although it is almost always better to leave the old trees in the ground). In this way, trees have come to play a key role in biodiversity offsetting and 'net zero' calculations. It is easy to be cynical of these neoliberal environmentalisms, particularly given the ubiquitous appearance of the tree-planting pledge in the manifestos of political parties whose policies are otherwise difficult to reconcile with a serious commitment to ecological flourishing. Tree-planting has come to seem something like global capital's get-out-of-jail-free card: keep on with business-as-usual but grant yourself ecological immunity with a few saplings, or sometimes with a huge number of them. The sometimes-significant failure rates of these large-scale plantings are only one reason to treat them with skepticism. Corporate arborealities are problematic for their reduction of the complexity of trees and woods and the cultural traditions attached to them to base biological functions. A tree is understood in this context not as a specific habitat to specific creatures nor as a meaningful element of a cultural world, but rather as an entirely fungible object notable only for the services it provides to the dominant economic regime.

Rosetta S. Elkin's *Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation* provides a notable contribution to the hermeneutics of suspicion that is emerging in relation to mass tree planting programmes. Elkin's specific focus is the afforestation of drylands, areas with minimal tree cover and sparse human populations. Arid landscapes cover '41.3 per cent of the total planetary land surface' (6) and provide a notable challenge to the premise of anthropocentric ideologies. As Elkin notes, 'It is simply too much to accept that such a large portion of the planet is less than hospitable to humans' (7). One way to approach this geographical inconvenience might be to conclude that the planet must necessarily be understood as so much more than the locus of *Homo sapiens*, but the easier assumption seems to be that the planet has gone wrong in the areas that fail to support a certain conception of home to humans (though of course drylands are the home to many longstanding human cultures). The aim of tree planting in these regions is thus to incorporate them into the 'machinery of progress' (7). To be clear, Elkin's 'deep mistrust of afforestation' (7) is not directed towards small-scale local plantings that aim to supply 'shade, fruit, or resin' to local communities (6); rather, she is concerned with tree-planting that unfurls at a continental scale. These vast ecological transformations should be recognized, Elkin argues, as 'deliberately territorial', inscribing 'political agendas on local and often marginalized populations' (6). There is often very little interest in the existing plant life of drylands in afforestation schemes; preferred species for planting tend to be imported to create a '[c]opy-paste' approach that is prejudiced against extant plant species and detrimental to the 'culture of millions of humans' (6; 7).

Plant Life's critical interrogation of the politics and ecology of dryland afforestation is based on three case studies: the Great Green Wall, a 'supranational, cross-continental tree planting plan' currently in progress across the Sahel from West to East Africa (43); the Prairie States Forestry Project in the US which ran between 1934–1942 in the wake of the 'social devastation' created by the 'Dust Bowl drought' (107); and the Three Norths Shelter System (TNSS) in China planned to develop in a series through a series of phases initiated in 1978 and due to conclude in 2050 with the aim of halting desertification. Each of these explorations is motivated by the book's overarching question 'Why do humans insist on planting so many trees in places that do not support tree life?' (8). The question is simple

enough, though the answers are complex and emerge through an elegantly intricate structure. Rather than developing chronologically, *Plant Life* is structured by the 'tactics that legitimize and advance afforestation' in a particular context (8). Elkin identifies three such tactics, or procedures as she also describes them: *artefact*, *index* and *trace*, each of which is developed in relation to one of the case studies, which in turn leads to the discussion of a particular tree species.

Plant Life's first section on the idea of the *artefact* takes as its premise a reductive understanding of a plant as 'a static product rather than a living organism', which is 'forced awkwardly into human worlds and aggressively into biotic ones' through dryland afforestation (8). Tree planting, in this context, is structured by 'botanical authority and industrial standards' (21). While the United Nations sees the Great Green Wall as a 'living symbol of hope' (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification), Elkin identifies it as a 'well-funded committee' that continues the 'lineage of colonial forestry' and enables the 'state to regain control of marginal lands' (45). If there are thus 'hidden layers of exploitation and extraction' within the Great Green Wall, there are also intriguing moments of resistance, most notably in the unruly form of *Faidherbia albida*, a favoured plant of afforestation schemes due to its resilience to drought. Interestingly, *Faidherbia* also tends to oppose 'vegetative propagation and nursery standards' (66). Humanitarian elites want it to behave according to bureaucratic dictates, but it prefers to do its own thing. By foregrounding vegetal agency, Elkin reveals the complexity – politically, culturally and ecologically – that large-scale afforestation schemes disavow.

The second section on *index* continues the book's interest in power and bureaucracy. *Index* 'refers to the accumulation and distribution of planting units' which 'reorganize biotic formation and any practical or traditional knowledge between human and plant life' (85). There is a notable colonial tradition, Elkin notes, of seeing the American prairies as a 'blank canvas' (94) for tree planting that negates the 'cultures that thrived for thousands of years and the 'deep, ancient organisms that articulate as grasslands' (87). The Prairie States Forestry Project produced a 'monoculture embossed across the land' (112) that developed as land was 'stripped away from Native Americans in central Nebraska' (111). The key species in this section is *Ulmus pumila L*. which both expressed settler-colonial plans for the prairies and functioned as a colonist on its own terms because of its 'prolific seed habit'. *U. pumila*'s expansion indicates how plant life can 'emerge from pure commercial instrumentation into the wonders of compromise' (147).

The final section on *trace* concerns 'the evidence of tree planting radically disconnected from context' through which the 'landscape of afforestation' must be understood as a 'synthetic construction' (153). Again, a notable element of Elkin's analysis is the tension between the bureaucratic vision and the ecological reality of tree planting on the ground: 'it is relatively easy to plant millions of trees' but it is 'remarkably difficult for millions of trees to grow, thrive and survive in drylands' (153). Elkin's discussion of the TNSS is based on the observation that 'Planting fast-growing, water-consumptive trees is among the most crippling programs to life in drylands, an act of slow violence on the social and biotic structure of the land' (181–82). Planting *Populus*, an 'insatiable plant' valued for its quick growth, ostensibly helps to 'control dust storms and stabilize dry ground', but it also helps to sustain 'planting statistics', bolsters the wood fibre industry and shows afforestation as a way of carrying on down the 'slippery slope of state-sponsored resource extraction' (182).

Elkin's argument is trenchant and convincing; the book's territory is significant, not just for its specific critique of the feel-good energy of mass drylands tree-planting, but for its wider implications for understandings of the pitfalls of top-down corporate environmentalisms. *Plant Life* is not an easy book; the distinction between *artefact*, *index* and

trace can seem uncertain at times and literary scholars like me unfamiliar with the botanical technicalities that are central to Elkin's study will need to work hard. There is much that will be familiar to ecocritics here too. Although it is not an explicit element of the book, Elkin's work contributes to a Foucauldian tradition in the environmental humanities (and especially the postcolonial environmental humanities) concerned with the links between knowledge and power in landscape transformation. If the book seems cynical at times (though not without good cause), Elkin evades a sense of doom-mongering by her careful attention to the dynamic agency of the vegetal. It is certainly not a book that doesn't like trees. While the prose can be clunky, it is often when speculating on the meaning of plants that Elkin's writing comes alive. 'Do seeds behave?' (129), Elkin asks in a phrase that resonates beyond the immediate question of dryland afforestation. The question of how a plant can distinguish 'self' from 'non-self' (195) provides a telling invitation to read this book in dialogue with the plant philosophy of Michael Marder and the developing field of critical plant studies.

References

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