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Book Review

Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism. By Banu Subramaniam. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2024. Pp. 328 (Paperback). $30.00. ISBN 13: 978-0-295-75246-4.

In *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism*, Banu Subramaniam offers a critical examination of how modern botany emerged through European imperial expansion and continues to bear its epistemic legacies. Drawing on feminist science studies, postcolonial and Indigenous scholarship, queer theory, and her training as a biologist, Subramaniam argues that botany is not a neutral scientific discipline but one shaped by colonial practices of extraction, classification, and control. Botanical knowledge, she shows, developed through systems that rendered plant worlds legible within European hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and civilization.

From the Introduction (122), Subramaniam frames colonialism as an epistemic project that reorganized how nature was named and understood. European botanical classifications—especially Latin nomenclature and Linnaean taxonomy—functioned not merely as technical tools but as global infrastructures of power that defined legitimate knowledge, authoritative knowers, and possessable landscapes. The book's sustained attention to herbaria, naming practices, and specimen circulation offers a compelling reflection on archives, collections, and scientific authority. Organized into five thematic parts, each followed by an interlude, the book invites readers to imagine more ethical, plural, and reflexive ways of knowing and practicing science. The interludes serve as reflective pauses that interrupt conventional scientific exposition, drawing attention to the limits of rigid naming and classificatory frameworks while encouraging readers to reconsider how botanical knowledge is organized and legitimized.

The first part of the book, which is titled "Rootings", runs from chapter 1 through chapter 2. This part establishes both Subramaniam's intellectual project and her methodological approach. Chapter 1, "The

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Botanical Sublime: Affective Ecologies and Plant Life" (26–48), is partly autobiographical and partly historiographic. Subramaniam traces her early experiences in India—where plant life is interwoven with myth, spirituality, and everyday relationality—and contrasts those experiences with the Western botanical training she later encounters in the United States. This chapter introduces what she calls the "botanical sublime" (26–27), a concept that names the wonder, excess, and entanglement of plant life that resists being fully captured by reductionist scientific frameworks. The autobiographical register is not decorative; it is foundational to her argument that scientific disciplines carry histories within them and that lived experience can serve as a legitimate analytic lens for studying the politics of knowledge.

Chapter 2, "The Coloniality of Botany: Reckonings with the History of Science" (49–59), shifts into a more theoretical mode. Here Subramaniam challenges "internalist" (16) histories of botany that celebrate discovery and classification while neglecting colonial conquest, slavery, and extraction as the conditions that made so-called botanical progress possible. She frames colonialism as a project with durable infrastructures—conceptual, institutional, and archival—embedded in disciplines. The argument is not that botanical science is invalid but that its foundational categories and institutional practices require historical reckoning. This chapter functions as a methodological orientation: readers are invited to understand botany as a field that grew through empire and still bears its imprint. The interlude following part I appears designed to keep the reader attentive to form as well as content—an ongoing reminder that decolonial thinking must also experiment with narrative, genre, and voice (60–72).

The second part of the book, from chapter 3 to chapter 4, examines the worlds of nomenclature, classification, taxonomy, and systematics. This section is especially relevant for readers interested in the politics of naming. Subramaniam presents plant taxonomy as a project that did not merely organize plant diversity but also produced a global ordering aligned with colonial routes of travel, collection, and extraction. European explorers and naturalists framed their activities as discovery, even when the plants they "found" were already well-known and used by local communities. The colonial logic of "discovery" thus becomes a logic of epistemic ownership.

A particularly striking element in this part is the discussion of herbaria and specimen hoarding. Subramaniam describes the global distribution of herbarium specimens as a colonial map: large portions of the world's botanical archive are housed in institutions in Europe and North America, while regions where biodiversity is richest often have comparatively fewer specimens and fewer digitized resources. This is not presented as a mere imbalance in research capacity but as a legacy of colonial appropriation.

Chapter 3, "The Categorical Imperative: Names, Norms, and Normings" (77–102), critiques Linnaean classification as a Eurocentric system that became globally hegemonic. Subramaniam emphasizes that categorization is never only descriptive; it produces norms. Naming systems decide what differences matter and how organisms should be related. By standardizing a Latin-based naming scheme, botany created a shared scientific language—but one that historically sidelined Indigenous nomenclature and erased local knowledge lineages. The chapter thus frames taxonomy as both an intellectual system and a cultural instrument.

Chapter 4, "Perhaps the World Ends Here: Spicy Embranglements in the Postcolony" (103–123), takes South Asia and the spice trade as a site for examining how plant knowledge travels through conquest, commerce, and classification. Subramaniam links the commodification of spice plants to transformations in local economies and to the global scientific narratives that emerged around these plants. The chapter expands the argument of part II: classification is tied to control, and botanical knowledge is inseparable from the political economy of empire.

The interlude after part II functions as a conceptual hinge, reminding readers that the seemingly technical practices of systematics and archiving have lived consequences that branch outward into culture, identity, and power (124–130).

The third part of the book, "Floral Dreams", centers on plant reproductive biology and the history of "sexing" plants. Here Subramaniam argues that sexuality became a privileged lens in botany through a convergence of scientific revolution and European cultural ideas about sex and gender. Linnaeus, again, appears as a key figure: his elevation of reproductive organs as central to classification both shaped botany and reflected an anthropomorphic, gendered imagination of plant life.

Chapter 5, "The Orchid's Wet Dreams: Sex Told, Untold, Retold" (133–152) interrogates the vocabulary used to describe plant reproduction and asks whether "sex", modeled on human binaries, is the best conceptual framework for what plants do. Subramaniam invites readers to see how scientific narratives can naturalize social assumptions: when plants are framed through rigid male/female binaries, scientific explanation can quietly reinforce cultural norms. This chapter pushes beyond critique and gestures toward alternate theorizing—ways of describing plant life that do not default to anthropocentric metaphors.

Chapter 6, "In the Dark Shadows of the Tree of Life: Sex, Race, and Reproduction" (153–169) intensifies the critique by linking histories of plant reproduction to colonial histories of race and human reproduction. Subramaniam shows that colonial ideologies of difference traveled across domains: logics used to classify humans racially and hierarchically shaped scientific thought, and those same logics influenced how plant

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reproduction and variation were conceptualized. This is one of the book's most consequential claims: scientific categories do not only describe the world; they circulate across human and nonhuman worlds, carrying political histories with them.

The interlude after part III continues the book's pattern of pausing to unsettle the reader's sense of disciplinary comfort—encouraging reflection on how deeply language structures scientific imagination (170–180).

The fourth part of the book, "Pangaean Dreams" turns to biogeography and invasion biology. This section examines how the categories "native" (185) and "invasive" (187) are often framed through a binary logic of belonging and unbelonging—a logic that, Subramaniam argues, can be deeply racialized and politically mobilized. She reframes invasion biology through colonial history, suggesting that contemporary anxieties about species "out of place" (187) frequently forget the massive ecological reshuffling caused by European colonialism itself. In this framing, colonialism becomes a kind of botanical amnesia: it produces ecological disruptions and then narrates "foreignness" (185) as the problem without acknowledging empire as the original engine of displacement.

Chapter 7, "Botanical Amnesia: Colonial Hauntings in Plant Biogeography" (183–198), critiques the instability and politicization of the "native". Subramaniam challenges attempts to map contemporary nationalist politics onto ecological categories—for example, treating invasive species as analogues of colonizers or imagining ecological "purity" as an act of decolonization. She insists that ecological belonging cannot be disentangled from histories of conquest, forced migration, and global trade.

Chapter 8, "Like a Tumbleweed in Eden: Diasporic Lives of Empire" (199–212), uses the metaphor of plant diaspora to explore hybridity, adaptation, and identity. The tumbleweed becomes a vehicle for thinking about movement not as anomaly but as condition—both for plants and for people. The chapter refuses simplistic binaries that pit postcolonial and Indigenous frameworks against each other, arguing instead for a decolonial approach capable of holding multiple colonial histories at once.

The interlude after part IV reinforces the moral and analytic stakes of displacement, drawing attention to the unequal afterlives of empire across ecological and cultural landscapes (213–224).

The final part, "Uprootings", is the book's most explicitly programmatic. If the earlier sections diagnose the coloniality of botany across naming, reproduction, and biogeography, Part V asks what it would mean to do botany otherwise. Subramaniam rejects the familiar separation of "two cultures" (science versus humanities) and proposes a praxis-oriented decolonial botany grounded in collaboration, ethical accountability, and epistemic plurality.

Chapter 9, "Decolonizing Botany: From Theory to Practice" (227–235), outlines practical ethical questions that should shape contemporary research: Where do herbarium specimens come from? If obtained through colonial theft, what forms of return, repair, or shared access are required? How should consent, collaboration, and community authority be handled in field research? How should science education address colonial histories and Indigenous botanical knowledge? These questions read as an agenda not only for botanists but also for curators, archivists, librarians, and institutions that steward scientific collections.

Chapter 10, "Dreams of a Lively Planet" (236–238), closes with a more visionary orientation, emphasizing that decolonization is not a single corrective act but an ongoing commitment. Subramaniam warns against "urgency" narratives that dismiss justice-oriented change as too slow or disruptive. One of the book's most memorable arguments is that even modest changes—such as renaming species that honor violent colonists—often meet fierce resistance, even though botanical reclassification is routine when driven by internal scientific evidence. The resistance, then, is not about scientific feasibility but about what kinds of change institutions are willing to prioritize.

The final interlude leaves readers with a future-oriented imagination: botany as a field that could become more inclusive, accountable, and socially just if it takes seriously its own histories and power relations (239–252).

Botany of Empire is a rigorous interdisciplinary study that makes a significant contribution to feminist science studies, postcolonial scholarship, environmental humanities, and the critical history of biology. Subramaniam demonstrates that botany is not a neutral scientific enterprise, but a discipline shaped by European imperial expansion, whose naming practices, classificatory systems, and institutional infrastructures continue to bear colonial legacies. Rather than rejecting science, she calls for a more reflexive and ethically accountable botany grounded in historical awareness.

The book's strength lies in its integration of theory with scientific practice, linking Linnaean taxonomy, plant reproduction, invasion biology, and herbarium circulation to broader social hierarchies. The book's sustained attention to collections, archives, and nomenclature resonates strongly with ongoing debates about colonial holdings, digitization ethics, and Indigenous knowledge sovereignty. *Botany of Empire* offers a compelling framework for rethinking how scientific knowledge has been produced—and how it might be practiced otherwise.

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